

play



2007 RACING FORECAST
Get behind the wheel of the
year's best racers!

BIO SHOCK

The veil is lifted on one of the year's
most anticipated games

April 2007

U.S. \$5.99 CAN \$7.99



0 714 86 03836 8

04 >

INSIDE
Looney Tunes:
Acme Arsenal
Atelier Iris 3
Wing Island
Spiderman 3
Super Paper Mario
Tomb Raider Anniversary
Hack//G.U. 2 Reminisce
Wario: Master of Disguise
300: March to Glory
Death Jr.: Science Fair of Doom

IT COMES...

Vengeance, Power, and a Menace born of Jewels.

Over 5 hours of brilliantly
voiced gameplay!

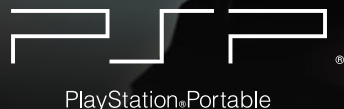
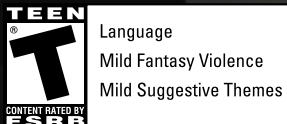


Wireless vs mode lets you
battle and trade over
100 monsters!



Monster Kingdom Jewel Summoner

From the creator of the Shin Megami Tensei® series, with a stunning soundtrack and detailed storylines, this is the first truly deep RPG for the PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) system!



**Finally, a dungeon RPG
strong enough
for a man...**

LEGEND OF THE UNEMPLOYED NINJA

無職忍傳 IZUNA

**...but played as a
hot CHICK!**

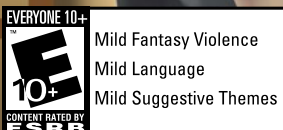


**You have the privilege of
controlling the cutest ninja ever,
Izuna (that's me!), through all these
different dungeons. Customize my
weapons and unleash devastating
ninja spells to destroy monsters
and score major treasure.
Let's face it, I need the cash!**

The Izuna online comic is coming to atlus.com!

NINTENDO DS

ATLUS
WWW.ATLUS.COM



© 2006, 2007 SUCCESS/NINJA STUDIO
™ and Nintendo DS logo are trademarks of Nintendo. © 2004 Nintendo.

Licensed to and published by Atlus USA.
The rating icons are trademarks of the Entertainment Software Association.

Letter from the Editor

Wii're waiting...

As Summer approaches and our "next-gen" consoles become "current-gen" consoles—and none to soon; I'm sick of the term—let's take a look at how things are progressing now that the "launch window" is officially closed. Beginning with the Wii, there's both good and not so good news. The good news is, of course, that we've all become accustomed to our new controllers and all the wonderful configurations they bring. Wii Sports and Wii Play are loads of mindless fun; Zelda was simply amazing and what few exclusives the system has had have been good, if not technologically lacking games. Metal Slug Anthology was a bust (the better version being on PSP) and aside from a few forgettable exclusives (save for Red Steel, which I shouldn't have to defend) the third parties did exactly what we were afraid they'd do: port their brains out, creating inferior versions of PS2, 360, and PS3 games with retrofitted controls. It's actually been worse than I'd imagined. Too many Wii games are sad ports often hitting months after a game has run its course on other consoles. The Wii needs exclusive software to maintain its squeaky clean image.

So, what's being done? Sadly, not much. When asked about the console's killer app, Mario Galaxy, the official word is there is no word; Battalion Wars, Disaster: Day of Crisis, Metroid Prime 3 Corruption, Project H.A.M.M.E.R. and Super Smash Brothers Brawl are all TBA (representing the entire 1st party lineup) and Super Paper Mario is a GameCube game yanked from its controller-bound roots and re-jiggered for the Wii...They could have at least included an option to use the console's sterling control pad.

Meanwhile the 3rd party outlook is bleak: There are a few exclusives floating around like Konami's Wing Island and

the new Crystal Chronicles (see you in December), but for the most part, every Wii game will or has been available as a traditionally controlling game. Which leads us to the great Japanese hope, No More Heroes (pg. 13), the only exclusive killer app headed for a summer release...in Japan. We've asked Capcom and they haven't picked it up, so be on the lookout. If it can be localized and brought to market this summer, you're looking at the game that will bridge the gap while we wait for Nintendo to get their ducks in a row. The simple fact of the matter is that this system will not thrive without exclusive remote- and nunchuk-tailored software. The system's got the base—it's well on its way to being a top dog—so what's with these third parties? Why is the only killer app an import without a US release date? And where's our Mario Galaxy, dammit!! Like most of you I (Wii) love the Wii; but we loved the GameCube just as much and the 3rd parties skewered it and left it for dead. Reggie: don't you let them do it again. Just say "no" to their warmed-over scraps. Do we really need more hand me down Ant Bullys, SpongeBobs and Rampages? I thought this was going to be a revolution, not a dumping ground.

As for PS3...all is well! You can go get Motor Storm and see what the (near) future holds—those cell processors are beasts! And Ninja Gaiden Sigma, Lair, Eye of Judgment, Heavenly Sword, Warhawk, and Killzone 2 are all closing fast and all system exclusive! Soon PS3 users will see what it's like to own an Xbox 360...well, until the red circle of death comes to your house.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief



Art by: LeSean Thomas

play magazine staff

Editorial

Editor In Chief **Dave Halverson**
 Executive Editor **Brady Fiechter**
 Senior Editors **Greg Orlando, Casey Loe**
 Associate Editors **Heather Campbell, Eric Patterson**
 Associate Anime Editor **Bill Gray**
 PC Editor **Mike Griffin**
 Japanese Correspondents **Nick Des Barres, Dai Kohama**
 Copy Editors **Daniel Campisi, Zach Korwin**
 Photographer **Michael Tran**
 Original art by **Dany Orizio**

Design

Art Director **Michael Hobbs**
 Associate Art Director **Chin "Nelson" Lui**

Advertising and Sales

Publisher **Michael Eisenberg**
 Contact **Michael Eisenberg**
 sales@playmagazine.com
 Tel 818.707.7786 Ext 102
 Fax 818.707.7212

play magazine online

Online Content Manager **Eric Patterson**
 webmaster@playmagazine.com

Corporate

Director Of Operations **Julie Halverson**
 jhalverson@playmagazine.com
 818.707.7786 ext.104

VP of Sales & Marketing **Michael Eisenberg**
 meisenberg@playmagazine.com

Administrative Assistant **Daniel Campisi**
 dcampisi@playmagazine.com

Subscriptions and Customer Service
(in U.S.) 800-694-6506
 (outside U.S.) 818-487-2036
 email: play@espcomp.com

play magazine Offices
 Fusion Publishing, Inc.
 29229 Canwood St., Suite 200
 Agoura Hills, Ca 91301
 Tel 818.707.7786 Fax 818.707.7212

play magazine partner



Legal Mumbo Jumbo

PLAY™ (ISSN 1537-7539) is published monthly by Fusion Publishing, Inc., 29229 Canwood St., Suite 200, Agoura Hills, CA 91301. Volume 6, Issue 4. Single issue rates: \$5.99, yearly newsstand value: \$71.88. The one year (12 issue) subscription rate is \$19.99 in the U.S., \$44.99 in Canada, and \$64.99 in all other foreign locales. Checks must be made payable in U.S. currency only to PLAY. Send address changes to: P.O. BOX 16567, North Hollywood, CA 91615-9684 or email play@espcomp.com For subscription service questions, call (800)694-6506. We periodically make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please write to us and include a copy of your mailing label. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue, as well as for any subscription changes to take place on any existing subscription. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials; all unsolicited material becomes the property of Fusion Publishing, Inc. Without limiting the rights of copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Fusion Publishing, Inc. To reuse any material in this publication, obtain a permission request form by contacting Fusion Publishing, Inc. at (818)707-7786 [phone] or (818)707-7212 [fax]. © Fusion Publishing, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Play™, Fusion Publishing™, Play: Girls of Gaming™, Play: The Calendar™, Fusion Publishing Presents™ are trademarks and copyrights of Fusion Publishing, Inc.™ and © for all other products and the characters contained therein are owned by the respective trademark and copyright owners. All materials listed in this magazine are subject to manufacturers change and the publisher assumes no responsibility for such changes.

POWERFUL MAGIC. MASSIVE GUNS. EXTREME DESTRUCTION

AVAILABLE EVERYWHERE

WIELD FEARSOME WEAPONRY

that you can transform and upgrade to completely obliterate those who stand in your way.

GLORIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE

brought to life with an advanced physics engine - create chain-reacting explosions and use the terrain itself as a weapon.

WEAVE ASTOUNDING MAGIC

with an intense arsenal of spells - turn the city into a sea of roaring flames and control thunderstorms to wreak unbelievable havoc.



Bullet Witch © 2007 Atari Europe SASU. All rights reserved. © 2006 AQ Interactive Inc. All rights reserved. Developed by Cavia. Marketed and distributed by Atari, Inc. ATARI word mark and logo are registered trademarks owned by Atari Interactive, Inc. All rights reserved. "Bullet Witch" is a Trademark of AQ Interactive Inc. The ESRB ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox LIVE, and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

Jump in.



contents

April 2007



008

Ink

Calling all Wiis!

010

Database

Now that's interesting!

012

Cover Story

Bioshock

Out in the open for the first time

020

Previews

.Hack// G.U. 2, Spidey 3, and more...

037

Reviews

First print TMNT review plus Super Paper Mario and Brave's back!

054

Play Mobile

More DJ, Wario's back in action, 300 Marches to Glory, and more!

061

Play PC

Fresh baked and oven fresh, as usual

067

Play Japan

Live from Tokyo

071

Play Anime

Three AMAZING new titles

076

Now Reading

Avril Lavigne & Treasure's treasure

079

Media

DVD reviews

Aedris Eclipse

GENERATION OF CHAOS™





LETTER OF THE MONTH

To score or not to score...

A Review without numbers? Have you all gone crazy? This is a world where everyone is judged by numbers, just look around. Houses, cars, game systems, paychecks, we compare what we have only by its monetary value, and whether it's more or less than those around us. Football scores, Baseball, Basketball, the Olympics, the Box Office, the Stock Exchange, and do I need to throw in the number of karats on an engagement ring? The world would be mad without numbers to quantify the quality of a product, and that's a world I'm sure I would not know up from down, Psychonauts from Shadow the Hedgehog, Lost Planet or Bulletproof, Mass Effect from, well whatever bad game is coming out in the future.

Seriously though, I read your magazine for the reviews. And that's the key word, read. I enjoy the whole magazine and read it front to back, and actually save them in case I ever want to go back and look at something. I think it's fine if everyone at Play wants to stop the whole scoring business, but I've seen other magazines do it and the results haven't gone over as well as I think they hoped. My suggestion if you really want to do this is to leave that nice box at the end with the pluses and minuses, and maybe enlarge it a bit. Maybe the 5 best things and the 5 worst things about the game. Or make it 3. Because there will be some people who won't like it, so throw them that bone and hope it's distracting enough for them not to see that a number isn't there.

And again, great magazine with or without the scores. And after all this I have something to ask, as it's one game I loved in the arcades and now that next-gen is available with all the downloads I'm hoping someone (Rare) is working on it. Is there any chance at all that I'll be able to download Killer Instinct for either the PS3 or the 360? Heck, I'd pay for the game if they put it on the shelves. Can you give me some hope on that, I miss my Ulltttrrrraaaaa Commmmbbbboooooo!!!

Chris C

Score or no score is far from a black-and-white issue, hence its inherent touchiness. Here's the way I think most gamers look at it: Most of us don't just read one magazine or visit only one website (we have our favorites, certainly; I'm writing to mine), so

we use the scores as a kind of guidewire to summarize all the different information streams we immerse ourselves in before making that fifty, sixty, or even two-hundred dollar investment. My experience has been, when I see one review that absolutely pans a game for literally the same reasons another loves it, that means I'm probably going to love the game (and, at least nine times out of ten, I do). This may be how I've gotten most of the entries in my library, but I know this doesn't work for everyone.

The point I want to make, though, is that you can't just abandon a score system; I think there should be something that ties up the review. Just like news articles answer a certain six questions (five beginning with W), game reviews answer a similar set of questions, namely what's liked and hated about the game. It's subjective, yes, but it's informative, and that is what we call a good, sound review.

"Seriously though, I read your magazine for the reviews. And that's the key word, read."

So, my verdict on the score/no-score is neither an aye nor a nay. If anything, I say nay to the 10-point scale, but aye to keeping the plus/minus box, just as a way of tidying up a potentially misleading review. In fact, Just to make sure I'm not misleading anyone:

(plus) Go for it, it's a great idea...
(minus) but tread lightly.

With utmost sincerity, MJA

I was just handed the latest issue of Play Magazine (Volume 6, Issue 03) and read it cover to cover, as I always do. I then went back to your excellent editorial and thought about your question to the masses about having ratings to the games you review.

I relate this question to asking a friend "What did you think of that movie?". Since they're not me, their answer may or may not be the same answer I'd come up with. I've been burned on a lot of movies because friends told me to stay away and I did, but then watched it anyway and thought it was great, but I've also been saved because some movies were actually as bad as they said.

I think having a number on a review isn't necessary as long as you have a well

written review, with good pros and cons to explain the game as well as you can. As a matter of fact, the number is almost hidden in the corner anyway, so you kinda have to look for it. When I read a review, I usually see the title, check the system, read the Pros and Cons, then the actual review. The number doesn't really mean much if I don't like what I read or if I agree with the Cons. I love your magazine. I haven't ever thought so highly of a video game magazine, but Play does it for me. I think your magazine is fantastic when it comes to all the content you throw in it. I suggest dropping the ratings numbers for one issue and see what happens. That's really the only way you'll know if people care about them either way. If you bring them back, that's fine; I can deal with a small box with a number in it on each review if I continue to receive such excellent content otherwise.

-Bob G.

Necessary evil?

Something I read today on the net has me a little worried. Konami has announced that they will shut down their online servers for *Metal Gear Solid 3: Substance* by April of this year. Now I've never played this game online, or any game for that matter. So why does this bother me? Japanese gaming is starting to seem less and less enticing to the public's eye. Well, here in the states anyway.

As an American, I love that Western game development has taken off as it has in these past few years. The *Ratchet and Clank* series has been at the top of Japan's top ten list and the *Grand Theft Auto* series reached an international spotlight. Online gaming really took off too, mainly thanks to Microsoft and its Xbox Live network. I have nothing against online gaming and the millions that partake in it (seeing as it has made gaming a competitive sport, if not a profession), but since that's what the majority of gamers want nowadays, it's been hurting the success of some would-be huge single player adventures. Look what happened to the talented house of Clover Studios. *Okami* was such a masterpiece and yet they had to shut down because of its mediocre commercial

success. I personally would love *Gears of War* just the same if it didn't have multiplayer, but I'm sure it wouldn't have been near as successful as it has been without it. The online frag fests rule much of the day here in America and Western developers are the best at it.

I could care less if the next major release of *Super Mario*, *Final Fantasy*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Resident Evil* or *The Legend of Zelda* didn't have any online components. I hope they never do. But I do also feel that if they don't have some online features, their popularity might start dying out. Gaming is a passion and some of us are very hardcore in our love for this media. But gaming is also a business and money talks. I just hope that gaming can continue to be as friendly to a single player adventure as to a multiplayer game. That way, we all have our fill.

Raul A

Ad campaigner

While I understand and mostly agree with what Greg Orlando was saying in the "Back Of The Book" of your February issue, there are some things that I think he may be overlooking. He stated that the idea of in-game advertising adding to the realism of a game is "burnished nonsense". I disagree. If you remove the logos and player names from ANY sports title, it becomes a lot less desirable in the eyes of pretty much everyone. While I don't personally care about sports games, the idea of Madden with made-up teams and NASCAR without the Tide and Pepsi logos all over cars DOES, in fact, make the game a lesser product. It DOES make the game less realistic. While the blatant product placement in *Fight Night Round 3* was only partially annoying, it made some sense because that's just how sports are. A UFC game that didn't have Xyience logos everywhere would seem out of place. On the flipside, it's silly that every car in *Las Vegas* is a Dodge (as in *Rainbow Six*), or that Jack uses a Casio watch to communicate in *Headhunter*. So while I don't welcome the ads, I do think they are beneficial if used in the proper context. Hell, sports games could have full-on commercials instead of loading screens so it looks like you're watching the game on TV. As long as Master Chief doesn't end up with a Carl's Jr. sticker on his forehead, I think we can handle it.

Twizlex Crunch

Unleash Your Inner Rockstar.

Guitar Hero II™



New for Xbox 360™
- X-Plorer Controller
- Additional songs and downloadable content



www.guitarherogame.com



Gibson
PURE

PlayStation 2



HARMONIX

ACTIVISION



Guitar Hero II™ & © 2006-2007 RedOctane, Inc. RedOctane® is a registered trademark of RedOctane, Inc. and Activision is a registered trademark of Activision Publishing, Inc. Game code © 2005-2007 Harmonix Music Systems, Inc. Developed by Harmonix Music Systems. Covered by one or more of the following patents: U.S. Patent Nos. 5,739,457, 6,018,121, 6,225,547, 6,347,998, 6,369,313, 6,390,923, 6,425,822, 6,429,863, 6,645,067 and 6,835,887; patents pending. Gibson®, S.G.®, X-Plorer®, and the shapes and design elements of the SG Controller, X-Plorer Controller and the guitars are trademarks of Gibson Guitar Corp. under license by RedOctane, Inc. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox Live, the Xbox logos, and the Xbox Live logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries. The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks and trade names are the properties of their respective owners. All rights reserved.

Hero Worship

Life after Killer 7

g rasshopper Manufacture's latest—and from the looks of it greatest—new project is set for a summer release in Japan, meaning a US bid won't be far behind, marking the best Wii news since the systems launch. Starved for original content, it doesn't get any more original than this. Titled "No More Heroes," this will be the first sandbox game for the system, which begs the question: why choose Wii for such a game? We can only guess (an interview is imminent) that Grasshopper sees great opportunity in the Wii's unique control and dedicated user base. Given their avant-garde style and the size of the city, Santa Destroy—about 2 square miles—the Wii should have no problem. We don't know much about the story, other than it centers on aspiring assassin Travis Touchdown—a contract killer who would like nothing more than to become the world's top assassin. Armed with a trusty futuristic sword and lots of ambition, he sets out to obliterate the competition on a massive motorcycle maneuvered by rotating the Wii remote.



On the GTA Trail

We're gonna need a bigger trailer park...

What could be the most anticipated game trailer of all time, GTA IV—marking the first next-generation version of the game that started it all—will be revealed on March 29. Since the release of GTA III, the field has become a lot more crowded with the introduction of three major new franchises: Saints Row, Just Cause, and Crackdown. It will be interesting to see what the grand daddy of the genre will be bringing to the sandbox.



Gearing up

Gears of War coming to a theatre near you

Although details are nil, we have it on good authority that the Gears of War script is being worked on by several prominent writers for an upcoming blockbuster film, so now's as good a time as any to cast this beast of a motion picture...Seeing how Sonny Landham is past his prime (how perfect would he have been, circa Predator?) there's only one choice for Marcus Fenix: Gotta go with Vin Diesel. He can act, and he's a gamer, so if the boots fit... If not Vin, it cannot be The Rock. It's the law.



Ring Around Marvel

Comic company to produce monthly Halo comic

Microsoft's once again shaking its moneymaker. The company is pairing up with Marvel Comics to produce a monthly comic book based on the Halo video game.

Marvel Comics announced the partnership at the 2007 New York Comicon, held in the city's Jacob K. Javits Convention in late February. Sadly, little else is known about the comic, save for that Brian Michael Bendis and Alex Maleev have been signed on as the book's regular artist and writer. Bendis and Maleev, both comic veterans, collaborated on Marvel Comics' Daredevil, where the two gained critical acclaim.

With two Halo games already released for the original Xbox and a third title nearing completion for Xbox 360, the time seems right for a Halo monthly title. The book has already been preceded by a series of Halo novels, action figures, and T-shirts. Last year, Marvel and Microsoft collaborated on a 128-page graphic novel that featured story and artwork from such notable creators as Simon Bisley, Geof Darrow, and Moebius.

Neither Marvel Comics nor Microsoft has commented further on the matter, but a representative for the game's developer Bungie, speaking on an Internet message board, stated the comic will stay true to the original property, and its content will be closely supervised.



Carry the scales of justice in one hand, and a two-ton sedan in the other.

You're a genetically enhanced agent of justice authorized to do whatever it takes to sweep the criminal scum out of Pacific City. From the streets to the rooftops, use anything you can get your hands on to show the thugs that crime doesn't pay. And for the ultimate payback, combine forces in co-op play for twice the destruction and double the retribution. **All Justice. No Restraints.**

INCLUDES INVITATION TO HALO®3 MULTIPLAYER BETA

Limited time offer—look for specially marked boxes.*



WWW.CRACKDOWNONCRIME.COM

realtime
worlds

Microsoft
game studios

XBOX
LIVE



Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Use of Drugs

Jump in.

 XBOX 360

*Limited time offer—see www.xbox.com/halo3. Xbox 360™ hard drive, Xbox Live™ Gold required. Crackdown™ developed by Real Time Worlds Ltd. for Microsoft Corporation. Crackdown, the Crackdown logo, Real Time Worlds, and the Real Time Worlds logo are trademarks of Real Time Worlds Ltd. in the United States and/or other countries. All rights reserved. © 2006 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved. Microsoft, the Microsoft logo, Xbox, Xbox 360, the Xbox logo, Xbox Live, and the Xbox Live logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries.

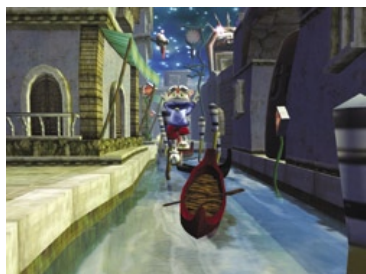
NPD Group database

Fun with numbers

april 2007

We often refer to games that for whatever reason underperformed at retail; be it bad timing, a lack of marketing, launching on the wrong console—whatever. Curious what the actual numbers were we sought out the sales figures and in many cases were surprised by the results...We aren't always right.

compiled by Dave Halverson



Blinx: The Time Sweeper 314,000

Verdict: Who said platformers were dead? Blinx was a huge success.

Blinx: Masters of Time and Space 96,000

Verdict: Should have stuck with the original formula.



Tork: Prehistoric Punk 20,000

Verdict: Unloved and un-marketed little Tork managed to find only 20,000 homes (all 20,000 Play readers fo sho) although that may have been all Ubisoft actually produced.



Sudeki 113,000

Verdict: Not bad, but not great either,

just like the game: Definitely deserving of a sequel.



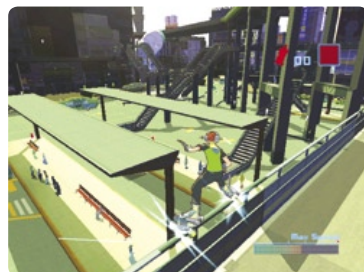
Voodoo Vince 74,000

Verdict: File this one under puzzling. Vince had it all. Then again, there's a chance only 80,000 were produced.



Kameo Elements of Power 268,000

Verdict: For a launch title that most of the press didn't gel with; a cool quarter mil is outstanding. So where's K2?



Jet Set Radio Future 103,000

Verdict: Not bad for a misunderstood launch title back when the Xbox was a fledgling new console. What's up Sega? Why'd you abandon ship?



Primal 171,000

Verdict: Once upon a time 171k would have been considered a huge success, although I'm sure SCEA (like us) figured they had a half million seller on their hands. Still if the game performed in the UK, it did quite well.

The Mark of Kri 187,000

Verdict: Strong number...

Rise of the Kasai 83,000

Verdict: They made a better game and... what happened here? Fickle gamers!

Blood Will Tell 18,000

Verdict: Now that's sad. Sega banked on the otaku and found out how few there really are. Still, an exceptional game.

Tenchu: Fatal Shadows 76,000

Verdict: Not bad but we always felt Sega missed the boat by not porting FS to Xbox with cleaned up models. They'd likely have topped 150,000

Death by Degrees 46,000

Verdict: The reviews were way off (you had to beat this one to see its greatness) but they shouldn't have had this big an impact. Sad.

Legend of Kay 22,000

Verdict: Another great platforming epic that only we liked. We're guessing that the whole talking cat thing is what jinxed it. Still 20+ thousand of you took our word for it.

Maximo vs. Army of Zin 83,000

Verdict: The original, though harder, was the better game and the sales reflect it. Still, not bad if it did okay in Japan and the UK.

Okami 212,000

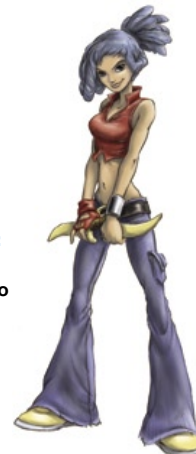
Verdict: Justice! Combined with Japan and the UK, Okami was a major success! So why'd Clover shut down again??

Kya: Dark Lineage 67,000

Verdict: It's higher than we thought however; Kya should have sold well over the 150,000 mark and become a franchise.

Asterix and Obelix: Kick Buttix 15,000

This game had zero press, and even less marketing, meaning 15,000 Play readers stepped up. See, we told ya!



Gunvalkyrie 97,000

Verdict: Here was a launch sci-fi/platformer reserved for only the most elite gamers and it sold nearly 100,000 copies: A testament to the amazing Smilebit. Why did Sega disband their greatest asset? Why does Sega do a lot of things...?



Psychonauts (Xbox) 81,000

Verdict: If it sold as well on or better on PS2 then Psychonauts wasn't a failure at all. Glad we checked. This would suggest a world-wide number well above 200,000 copies.



Phantom Dust 69,000

Verdict: A Majesco game with almost no marketing or press (outside of yours truly) 69,000 isn't so bad, although for how great a game it is, it should have sold triple that.

ToeJam and Earl III: Mission to Earth 69,000

Verdict: Well, there wasn't a plague of 2002 that we know of so this is another mystery.

EVIL LURKS ON EVERY SERVER



INTENSE REAL TIME BATTLES



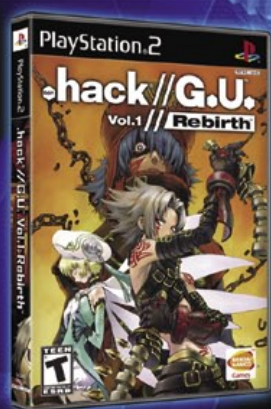
EPIC, ORIGINAL STORYLINE



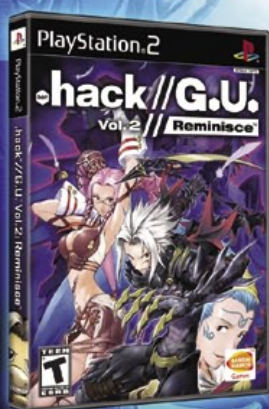
CUSTOMIZABLE WEAPONS

"...AN ACTION-RPG GAMER'S DREAM COME TRUE."

- PLAY MAGAZINE



IN STORES NOW!



COMING SOON!

THE YEAR IS 2017, AND SERVERS OF THE MOST POPULAR GAME IN THE WORLD ARE INFECTED WITH A DANGEROUS ENTITY. YOU MUST HUNT IT DOWN AND DESTROY IT. WELCOME TO THE BEGINNING OF A NEW SERIES. WELCOME TO "THE WORLD."

HACK INTO: WWW.DOTHACK.COM//GU

WATCH THE NEW ANIME

.hack//Roots

PlayStation®2



Alcohol Reference
Fantasy Violence
Language
Suggestive Themes



.hack® //G.U.™ & © 2006 NAMCO BANDAI. © 2006 NAMCO BANDAI Games Inc. Rebirth and Reminisce are trademarks of NAMCO BANDAI Games America. NAMCO BANDAI Games logo is a trademark of NAMCO BANDAI. Published and distributed by NAMCO BANDAI Games America Inc. .hack and related characters, names, logos, distinctive likenesses, drawings and other images contained in this product are the exclusive property of NAMCO BANDAI. Used under license from NAMCO BANDAI. All rights reserved. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks and trade names are the property of their respective owners.



BIO SHOCK

BioShock

preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Irrational Games
Publisher	2K Games
Available	June

J

Jim: "What's the matter, Frank?"

Frank: "It's this thinning hair, Jim. Every day there's less and less."

Jim: "You know, the problem's not in your hair, it's in your genes."

Frank: "Hey, I don't go in for all that splicing stuff. My buddy says it's not safe."

Jim: "Shows you what your buddy knows."

Jovially and mechanically, Jim continues his sales pitch by explaining to Frank just how safe genetic manipulation really is, and how Frank couldn't possibly resist the benefits of a new, full set of hair.

But why stop with scalp regeneration? Could any man yearning to impress the ladies refuse an additional trip to the athletic enhancement center? After all, as the happy commercial jingle points out, "nine out of ten women prefer an athletic man."

As you descend in a submarine to the bottom of the sea to reach the secret society of Rapture, a more disturbing advertisement plays out like a slide show, displaying a man lighting a woman's cigarette with a flaming hand. In Rapture, extraordinary genetic powers like this are the norm. Gene tonics are as accessible as a can of Pepsi—and a deadly poison its creators were blind to anticipate.

When you exit the submarine, you discover a world that was obviously once thriving, beautiful and decadent, but now lies in ruin. Dead bodies are everywhere. Water floods the halls. The scars of what looks like the aftermath of a warlike conflict disfigure the abundant decor.

Your journey into Rapture is by mere accident, the random discovery of a desperate place of retreat after surviving a plane crash in the middle of the ocean. When you arrive, you are a blank slate, a frightened human being relying on instinct for survival and escape. It will take much time and exploration to discover the real truth behind Rapture. What you know on the surface is that this technologically anachronistic society was designed by a man named Andrew Ryan, who envisioned a utopian playground for the world's brightest and most gifted to run free.

As BioShock creative director Ken Levine explains, Ryan approaches his vision like a preacher calling on his flock: "I want to ask you a question... Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his own brow? No, says the man in Washington, it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican, it belongs to God. No, says the man in the Kremlin, it belongs to everyone. And I say, No, it belongs to you."

"That's what this city is about," says Levine. "They built it with this great notion, empower yourself. Be a man and own what you make. But the philosophy, like a lot of philosophies, goes too far. The interesting part of the story is watching why it falls apart. You'll see what kills it in the end."

Something awful has clearly befallen Rapture, and here's where

Beauty becomes horror in the underwater grave that is Rapture

words Brady Fletcher

the most familiar core of BioShock's gameplay begins to spin. You've got conflict, you've got an enemy, you've got guns, you know what to do. "At the beginning of the game, it might feel a little more traditional," Levine points out. "Throwing all the incredible depth at the player in the first room is not what this game is about. The game is about, here's your experience, and then... what was that?! I haven't seen anything like that before in a game. We keep throwing stuff at them that keeps them off guard, and before the player knows it, he has one ball in the air, two balls in the air, then he's got five balls in the air, but you can't throw them all up in the beginning and have him juggling. The challenge is knowing when to throw the next ball at the player."

"There's the danger of too much complexity put on the player all at once," adds lead designer Paul Hellquist. "That's been a challenge for the design team. Early on, you have to ask, how much can the player handle at once? We have to find just the right introduction schedule so that when the player is ready for something new, they get it. Balancing that with: Whoa, too much at once, I'm frustrated and just want to put the game down."

The easiest way to begin describing that first gameplay ball is by first-person shooting standards. When you initially find a pistol and are faced with some freak throwing fireballs at you, your gaming instincts tell you it's time to directly fight back, it's time to find more weapons and continue the shootouts with more force. Indeed, there are around eight fairly basic weapons to utilize in BioShock, which contain three modes of fire. The third set of ammo comes down to personal invention, like fashioning homemade explosives to outfit your grenade launcher with heat-seeking rockets.

"As a team, you have to decide, are we building a truck, a van, a hot rod? We're building a shooter," Levine points out. "That tells us how we tune, how we balance, and the core experience. But I think what happens as developers is, we go, Ok, shooter, get that ball of string. And that's where we fail. There are certain things you have to have—the shooting parts obviously have to be awesome. The sound has to be great, the enemies have to be cool and smart, the weapon effects have to be great. There are things that you have to have in a shooter. But



The shadowy streams of light from the ocean depths haunt the scene even more...



what happens, people say, 'You can't have that other stuff in a shooter,' and I say, 'Why not?' If there's one thing I can say about BioShock, it's, 'Why stop there?'"

"Because it's hard," laughs Hellquist.

"Because it's fu**ing hard," adds Levine. "Look, if you have guys like we have, great guys who have been together for a long time, put it to good use. Last game we made was SWAT 4, and it was really good, but you don't need Irrational Games to make SWAT 4. If you are going to have guys

that are this talented and have been working together this long, give them a challenge. And let me tell you, this game is a challenge. It's hard enough to make a great first person shooter, but to make it this much more, that's an incredible challenge."

So with BioShock's thick first-person shooting blood pumping through its veins, the "more" Levine continues to emphasize is being approached with distinctly rich ambition. "I believe we have this amazing experience that's really quite unlike what anyone has ever played. What we're trying to do is give the player this huge tool set, and say, here's your world, go into it and do as you will," explains Levine.

"Think about a typical first-person shooter,

what do you usually expect out of a first person shooter? Well, first, generally you expect it's going to be a fairly linear experience in terms of not just how you encounter the experiences, but the state you'll be in when you encounter those experiences. Even the best first-person shooters: You take a ball of string, unroll it. That's a first-person shooter, that's the geography of a first person shooter. It may go like this, like this, and like this, but it's basically a ball of string. BioShock, while it's not like a Grand Theft Auto game—because when you're a first-person shooter, having an entire city to walk around in without a vehicle, it's not really what it's all about. But like other games we've made before, it's a much more exploratory place to walk around in; you don't finish a level, you can go back and forth between the levels, much more like taking a page out of some RPGs, in terms of the layout of this base. And because we have the ability to grow yourself, to get more powers and incredible abilities, that really allows the player to explore, it's a much more exploratory component to the game. But all the exploratory stuff is based around the fact that, every situation the player encounters, it's going to be A) we're not going to know exactly what it's going to be like when they

get there, and B) we're not going to know what state the player's going to be in when he gets there. And that's what's totally different from most first-person shooters. When you get into a place in Half-Life, the designers know what the player's going to have, and they know what he's going to encounter. And that creates an experience that's very polished but also antiseptic in some ways. Because it's what the designers exactly intend. We're saying, that's not what we're all about. We're saying it's about what the user is going to experience, how each experience will be unique."

As you become more familiar with your surroundings, you'll be compelled to tap into the same genetic powers that ultimately led to the collapse of Rapture. Genetic enhancement tools were such a cornerstone to this society that they were casually sold in vending machines. These vending machines become the soul source that feeds every part of your character growth, purchased with the genetic material known as Adam.

"I think combining the sense of the player's character growing internally, and having that expressed upon the world, is really important. When you do a game that has any type of character growth, usually people expect to go to their character screen, and it's really niggly and number based," says Levine. "But we're not about that. We're about a really dynamic experience and making sure that all your growth is really visible. It's taking all those notions that in most games can just be done with a bunch of numbers; we're saying, no, no no. It's not about numbers. It's about dynamic simulation."

In addition to more routine purchases like health and eye growth—think of eye as the mana that powers your abilities—the choice of Adam expenditure falls across a number of categories, from plasmids to gene tonics to the slots that hold it all.

Plasmids are most generally described as the active powers that more directly get you out of a dangerous encounter, running on a separate track from the firearms. You'll be able to, say, freeze the enemy, electrocute them, incinerate them, or if you need to get the hell out and regroup, call on your teleportation power. If a less direct approach feels right, you might want to use an enrage plasmid, causing the enemies to

"And let me tell you, this game is a challenge." Ken Levine, creative director





go mad and turn on one another. With all the security enforcements in Rapture, another choice is to use a plasmid that makes the enemy the central target.

No less important to survival are the dozens of gene tonics, which enhance the more passive parts of the character, offering all sorts of ways to tweak yourself and further focus your approach to dealing with the continually shifting situations. If hacking is important or manipulating the machinery of the world seems more efficient than taking enemies head on with improved physical attributes, the choice is yours. And if you need to reassess your decisions, you can always return to a vending machine and switch out. "You have the capacity and it grows over time to equip a number of these. So you have a larger pool of options than you have capacity," explains Hellquist. "So it's an important choice to decide which ones you're going to use immediately. I've got five of these passive abilities, one's for armor, one's for dealing electric damage whenever you take a hit. But I can only use two, so which one do I use?"

"And all of our powers have to be as immediate as a gun," adds Levine. "There are many elements to deal with, but they're maintained with a simplicity of use."

Various types of

enemies lurk through the crumbling Rapture, but there is one in particular who is a most intriguing, most daunting presence. Known as Big Daddy, these giant beings lumber around in a deep-sea diving suit, their singular reason for existing: protect Little Sister. As the keeper of Adam, Little Sisters are sickly, seemingly deranged little girls

who skip along in the shadow of Big Daddy, thrusting needles half their size into the flesh of corpses to complete their mission of harvest. If you want Adam, you have to get to a Little Sister. If you want a Little Sister, you have to go through Big Daddy.

"The Big Daddies are so powerful in the world, and you normally wouldn't put an AI that powerful in a first-person shooter level," says Levine. "The way first-person shooters are designed, that's a huge boss

battle. But because the way our game is designed, you can break out of combat, you can go off and try something else, you can get more ammunition, you can go collect more resources and go to a vending machine, you can modify your weapon or do whatever. The damage you do to him is persistent, so you can come back to him. So

Just wait till you hear
Little Sister laugh...



you stalk him, he becomes your pray. As you need to grow, you sort of dynamically decide on the fly, should I go after this one? But then you look, what do I have, what is this tactical situation, is there security I can exploit, are there other AIs I can exploit? Can I set traps, is the tactical environment good?"

Without the Adam from a Little Sister, you have no way to reach the deeper sections of Rapture. So to progress properly, you're going to have to take down about three Big Daddies a level. You decide when and where it's going to happen. "The player sets up the terms for that combat. The game doesn't know where that's going to be," begins Levine. "The great thing about the unpredictable nature of it is, it's like the other AIs, the situation

is fluid, it's not a locked room where we know exactly what's going to happen. It's messy. And sometimes that mess is to your disadvantage, but you can also turn that mess to your advantage. And that's what's really cool about the mess of BioShock. The smart player will take advantage of the messiness. That's where games are going. The more interactive elements you put into a game, the messier it gets. The great thing about mess in the real world, the opportunistic person finds elements in the mess and brings them in. Without mess there is no opportunity... In BioShock, here's this fluid, dynamic, messy situation, what are you going to do about it? You have to give the players the tools to harness the mess and turn it into something great."

It's almost like organizing chaos. You have this chaotic system, the way

of the world, you have to put your brain into that system and start putting it together.

"Yeah, and I think you'll see this in the demo, that's really the challenge of the game. Here are the tools to, like you said, to organize chaos. Are you going to pull it off, or will it overwhelm you? You'll see, stuff just starts coming at you, you could make it worse for yourself. But I think generally, in almost every situation in BioShock, if something bad happens, you can turn it around and use it to your advantage. It's so important to us that it's not a game about linearity. It's not that ball of string."

When you do feel you're ready to tackle a Big Daddy, you'll be amazed by how many

elements are involved as the battle unfolds, and how many consequences arise through the choices you make. In one particular sequence, a Big Daddy appeared to be vulnerable, wandering through a more open room. The first course of action was to shut down the security system, shut down the bots—which costs precious Adam. One shotgun blast later and the result is little more than a pissed off Big Daddy. An effort to hack the bots fails. But why not use telekinesis on that teddy bear in the corner, light it on fire with that damaged pipe that's spewing flame, and ignite Big Daddy? Guess that doesn't end it either. But wait: a guy happens to show up on the balcony above, tossing explosives into the chaos. So finally, you grab those out of the air, redirecting them toward Big Daddy. At this point, he's weakened, but the best decision is to teleport out and resume the battle later.

BioShock wants you to constantly consider its persistent world. The world listens to you, and you have to listen back. If you're, say, in need of health, but can't afford to expend Adam in the area you're currently in, you might want to retreat to a health machine you hacked earlier in the game. If you notice the enemy healing itself, one option is to destroy the closest health machine so that nobody benefits. Or if you're in the right position, why not set a trap and lure the enemy to its death.

The ecology of Rapture is also extremely important. Shocking an enemy out of water may be useless. Zapping him in a flooded room could mean instant death. Any pools of oil immediately become horrific fire traps, sending the AI running for water—which if you're really thinking ahead, may have an electrical booby trap waiting to

"It's so important to us that it's not a game about linearity."



The definition of insanity.

bring the pain even more.

While there are definitely some scripted events in BioShock for manipulated impact and necessary gameplay beats, a lot of what you'll experience will rise out of that mess of randomness. And when there are moments when the gamemakers have established a more set scene, the path to conclusion is full of possibility. "It's more like throwing all the ingredients into the pot and seeing how it all turns out," says Hellquist. "Sometimes, a guy comes around a corner, totally unexpected, and you have no idea where the game will go. Most first-person shooters know exactly where the player is when they script their events, but we don't. Generally we have AIs that are existing in the world and doing their own thing, and we don't know where the hell they'll be."

"One of the great things that Half-Life introduced was that—I think of it as the Pirates of the Caribbean experience," adds Levine. "Half-Life set up this ability to sort of sit back and watch incredible stuff happen. The world felt like it had a life. That raised the bar. But what BioShock is now trying to do, and I talk about this a lot, when I talk about what our goals are for BioShock... Half-Life raised the bar, but has that bar for first-person shooters really been raised since then? We all get that, we know how to make scripted experiences work and make that powerful. But the next question is, how do you reintegrate player expression back into that, make epic scenes entirely player driven?"

The source for weighty emotional undercurrent in a game remains a fairly nebulous and difficult find, but BioShock is certainly exploring some very interesting



ground. When you finally free a Little Sister, you're faced with the choice of either killing her and consuming all the Adam she's collected, or freeing her from her tormented state and reaping only a fraction of the Adam in the process. Obviously, the game takes on an entirely different complexion depending on this very important decision. Even something as mundane as opening a door becomes intertwined in the process. Do you make the quick and easy decision to collect all the Adam you can, beef up your hacking skills and rip right through locked doors? Or do you care more about saving the Little Sisters and using the gathered Adam more

"I'm making a big, risky game like BioShock because I love making games."

sparingly, deciding instead to search for pass codes that will open those same doors?

In the beginning of BioShock, you meet Atlas, a leader of an underground movement who now calls on you to help save his family and escape Rapture. He wants to convince you that the Little Sisters are already dead and must be destroyed for the sake of survival.

Battling the wishes of Atlas is Dr. Tenenbaum, the brilliant scientist who created the Little Sisters after coming to Rapture, damaged and abused from her imprisonment during the holocaust. "At the bottom of the sea, she discovers this creature, this sea slug, which she calls Adam, and it has this ability, when it latches on to a host, to suck blood from it," explains Levine. "But its adaptation is that it heals the wound when it bites onto it by replacing the damaged cells with stem versions of those cells. In order to produce enough of this Adam, it has to be implanted into a human host. And that's where these Little Sisters come from."

In order to retrieve the Adam, you basically rip these slugs out of the Little Sisters. The rewards for taking the exploitation path are clear: You get a pile of Adam. The reward for helping these Little Sisters, freeing them from this state, is less clear. You get a little bit of Adam, but you're told: "Trust me, trust me," says the Tenenbaum woman. And the guy who's helping you says, "Trust her? She's the one who created them in the first place."

"Let's talk about the moral choices," continues Levine. "We try to bring every major story element, not as something you read about or hear about, but something that's central to the game. You want to make it part of the gameplay as much as possible. So the Little Sisters are the center of the story morally. They're also the center of the character growth in the game. And I think that's critical; you don't want them on separate tracks. So the player is left with this choice. It's something I don't think I've ever seen in a video game. When you bite this off, you have to accept how complex this is, coming up with dealing with this from a story standpoint and game standpoint."

Awfully enticing stuff, for sure. But while the effect of the storytelling takes an entire game to reveal, a few minutes with BioShock makes you already want to declare it a visual masterwork. The 1960s period touches mixed with the underwater tragedy feel wondrous and new. "With BioShock, one thing I learned, graphics do matter. Especially

if you're doing something a little less traditional like BioShock," admits Levine. "It had to look beautiful. If you take people to places they've seen, they can fill in the blanks. With BioShock, we have to fill in the blanks. Fortunately, they're really cool blanks."

There are many sections and layers to Rapture. While it was established with utopian visions, that did not exclude a survival of the fittest mentality. There's class separation, and you'll see this in areas where the less fortunate of society lived. Everything is painted with expression in mind. "There's something called *mise en scene*. That's when you see something in the world that tells a story," explains Levine. "To give you an example, there's a room you find in a hotel, where there's a bed, and there's a man and a woman lying in the bed; they're dead, in an embrace. Beside them is a bible, and there's a picture of a girl, their daughter. And there's a bottle of pills next to them. That's a *mise en scene*. There's a story there. The game is just full of them."

Working in the

foreground of all this story, Big Daddy and Little Sister are as unsettling as anything before them, joined by the rest of the rejects caught in the death and decay of this society of excess. Splicers, who are the malformed and sickened of Rapture's genetic experimentations, serve Andrew Ryan to the death, coming after you in a number of different ways. Occasionally you'll come across isolated characters that control a certain area. Sometimes they're nuts and need eliminated. Sometimes they need your help or agree to offer help of their own. You never quite know what you're getting into.

"There's this doctor, Dr. Steinman, as he starts going crazier, he takes over the whole medical area," details Levine. "You hear his diaries. He basically starts ruminating: Why am I trapped within normal interpretations of beauty? Why can't I be more like Picasso? These cubist interpretations of beauty. Eventually he starts walking down the hallways, thinking he's talking to Aphrodite about beauty. And you follow this descent into insanity. You hear about his descent, you see it on the walls: he has pictures of women. You know those plastic surgeons that take pictures of women and draw over them? You see these insane pictures he's drawing, these drawings over human faces. Eventually you come across his surgery theater, and

you deal with him. So through the story, it's all tied together: you hear about them, you see them, you encounter them. That's like subchapter in the story of BioShock."

Another area you'll encounter is sort of a recreational zone, where this musician, Sander Cohen, hangs out. Like most of the remaining inhabitants, he's "gone over the top. And he's having a conflict with all his former disciples, who he feels have betrayed him," says Levine. "And until you help him, he won't let you off the level. I don't want to go into too much detail, but there's this crazy conflict that you have to solve. It's all about descending into these people's crazy, messed up worlds."

Until then, the BioShock team have a lot to do, clocking in upwards of 80-hour work weeks to establish the final touches to their high-reaching vision. "We've chosen this task. I'm making a big, risky game like BioShock because I love making games," exclaims Levine. "At the end of the day, we have two goals: To be an awesome shooter, and to be one of those games where people say, that was the point where the shooter genre took another step up. And where people say, Ok, let's get excited about this stuff again." **play**



.hack//

G.U. Vol. 2: Reminisce

CyberConnect2's epic tale of virtuality continues...

words Dai Kohama

the time is almost here, .hack fans. Before you read any further, know that I will be referencing the storyline of .hack//G.U. Vol.1 in detail, as a proper preview done any other way wouldn't really work. If you're new to the .hack series and just want to know if G.U. is worth playing, I can make things easy for you: It sure is. Serial RPGs are probably a new thing for most Western gamers, and the groundwork laid in Vol.1 pays off in this installment beautifully. Go finish Vol.1, I'll wait.

Are we back? Excellent. How 'bout that cliffhanger, huh? Vol.2 begins exactly where Vol.1 ended: Atoli has been assaulted by the mysterious AIDA, though Kuhn soon stabilizes her with his avatar Magus. Haseo and friends seem to have gained a moment of respite, and Pi suggests Atoli log out from The World due to an audio issue she seems to be having.

There's a problem, however: She can't. Haseo and company soon discover that they can't return to the real world, either;

"If one were to think of .hack//G.U. as a three-act play, then Vol.2 is truly a perfect Act II..."





in fact, they no longer have any perception of their PCs, controllers or HMDs: It is as if they were actually living *within* The World. Yata the Prophet reveals that this phenomenon applies to every single player currently connected to the game. Everyone is trapped.

As Haseo's party begin their investigation into the source of the anomaly, Atoli realizes the attack she sustained from AIDA has put her in a degenerative state, placing her in mortal danger. Not wishing to trouble her friends, she leaves Raven alone, seeking her friend Sakaki...

If one were to think of .hack//G.U. as a three-act play, then Vol.2 is truly a perfect Act II: The concentrated threat AIDA presented in Vol.1 now jeopardizes the entire population of The World, and with character introductions out of the way (so to speak) the story can finally begin to live, beginning to ramp up to its epic conclusion. The ongoing tale of .hack is obviously one that unfolds across multiple media (including but not limited to games, anime, manga and novels, though America rarely gets much of the printed .hack saga), and while the original game series was largely standalone, this is not the case with G.U.

I wouldn't say knowledge of the anime series .hack//Roots is *entirely* necessary for proper enjoyment of G.U., but it would really, really help. The series was timed in Japan to end the day before the release of G.U. Vol.2, and with very good reason:

“.hack's strongest point has always been its story, though Vol.2 does have significant gameplay advantages over its predecessor.”

Creature designs are much improved compared to GU.

Roots introduces a major character who goes on to appear in Vol.2 with little in-game explanation, to say nothing of the added appreciation the anime will give you for .hack's exquisitely crafted over-arching storyline. If you have the means, I strongly suggest you watch Roots now while there's still a chance. It currently airs on Cartoon Network in North America.

.hack's strongest point has always been its story, though Vol.2 does have significant gameplay advantages over its predecessor. For starters, the level cap has been raised, and Vol.2 is less strictly linear than Vol.1. Haseo's Third Form is unlocked, along with the Scythe weapon class and an ability to change weapons in mid-battle, making him a lot more fun to play. Other new features include a full customization scheme for Haseo's bike



and an expanded power-up system for armor and accessories.

The most notable gameplay addition, however, comes in the form of “Crimson VS”, a brand-new minigame played with collectible cards in the vein of a Triple Triad or Tetra Master from Final Fantasy. There are players and tournaments scattered throughout The World, and far from being a tacked-on time-waster, Crimson VS is a complete game in and of itself, well-integrated into the central RPG experience.

The conclusion to the G.U. series, .hack//G.U. Vol.3: At A Walking Pace, is already out in Japan, and I've played it. I therefore have the unusual advantage of telling you definitively that playing all three installments of the series is *well* worth your

time, and it goes without saying that Vol.2 is at the very center of that experience. Stay tuned for our review of the English version of Reminisce, as well as coverage of Vol.3 soon. **play**

.hack//G.U. Vol. 2: Reminisce

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	CyberConnect2
Publisher	Namco Bandai Games
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Summer





Does whatever a spider can ...

words Greg Orlando

It's not commonly mentioned in superhero school, but sometimes—in the course of saving and protecting the public interest—it's necessary to push a supervillain's face into the side of an onrushing train. And sometimes, when that supervillain is composed entirely of sand and oftentimes wont to reform unharmed after such a calamity, it's wholly necessary to repeat the procedure.

With Spider-Man 3, the developers at Treyarch aren't satisfied to mirror the cinematic moments shown in the upcoming Spider-Man 3 movie. Instead, Treyarch wants to create its own dramatic scenes, and give players control during them. During a huge outdoors boss fight in Spider-Man 3, our hero will have to twist and flip dramatically in order to avoid a series of airborne cars hurled at him. Down in the sewers, Spider-Man's brawl with the



Sandman culminates with the villain's face being disintegrated—literally—particle by particle as a New York City subway train rushes past. And when the new Green Goblin, Harry Osborn, comes calling, Spider-Man's secret identity Peter Parker leaps to the fore for a mid-air battle on a Goblin Glider.

Now there is always a price to be had for everything, and Treyarch has opted to up the game's sense of drama and

allow players to have control of them, but only after a fashion. During these special cinematic moments, players will be prompted to enter button commands to ensure Spider-Man (or Peter Parker) successfully performs an action. In the sewers for the fight against Sandman, the game flashes the letter "A" on screen to show the gameplay button that must be hit immediately. Doing so means Spider-Man avoids a hammer blow from Sandman, which, in turn, causes "X" to flash. If this is pressed, Spider-Man will respond with a leaping attack to knock his foe off-balance.

Students of video game history will recognize this mechanic as a rip directly from the pages of Sega's Dreamcast adventure Shenmue. There, these cinematic-style gameplay moments were called QTEs or "quick-time events." Spider-Man 3, as with Shenmue before it, seems content to offer wonderful cinematic (QTE) moments with limited

player control.

It's a gamble, to be sure, but one that seems to work well within the confines of a title that otherwise offers a lot of freedom for players. A decidedly open-ended structure allows for lots of freeform exploration, web-slinging, wall-crawling, and good-deed doing; In Spider-Man 3, players will be able to soar across the entirety of a video game Manhattan, as well as penetrate its vast, 20-simulated-mile sewer systems in pursuit of truth, justice, and the American way. Beyond the carefully scripted bits, then, Spider-Man 3 offers freedom aplenty.

To add meat to the game, the developers are creating three all-new street gangs for Spidey to fight. Each gang has its own turf, and Spider-Man's invasion into it won't be taken lightly. These gangs serve as a warmup for more dangerous



Every super hero must master the uppercut.

fare, in this case Spider-Man's traditional foes: Green Goblin, Scorpion, Sandman, and Venom.

An all-new combat system has been created to allow Spider-Man to perform moves such as a rubberband-style attack where he'll use his webs to snare foes and quickly snap them back-and-forth into his fists. Further, Treyarch has promised Spider-Man will have access to two different move sets, depending on the costume he's wearing at the time. A traditional series of moves and attacks will be available when Spidey is wearing his original red-and-blue costume. While wearing his new, black suit (which later turns out to be a living organism responsible for the creation of the supervillain Venom), Spider-Man's moves will be more direct, less flashy, but certainly more aggressive.

There's more, much more to be had: Missile-shooting ninja; Spider-Man using his web-shooters to create projectiles to shoot into, um, Sandman's sensitive parts; and a brand-new "Spider-sense"

mode wherein players will be able to spot hidden enemies and see objects in the environment that can be interacted with. However, Activision and Treyarch are not altogether keen on spoiling any surprises the game may hold. As of press time in late February, Activision is content to show the game off, but not let anyone actually play it. It seems this spider's web won't be fully revealed until May when Spider-Man 3 sees release in theaters. **play**

"A decidedly open-ended structure allows for lots of freeform exploration."

Spider-Man 3

System(s)	Wii, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, GBA
Developer	Treyarch
Publisher	Activision
Available	May

preview



Atelier Iris 3 Grand Fantasm

words Eric L. Patterson

Transmuters... ore that meets that fire



back in the early days of my life as a paid video gamer, I remember doing a feature on a new RPG from Japan called Atelier Marie. The game looked quite interesting, but also like something we'd never get in America. You have to understand... back then, games like that just didn't come to this country, at least not without a huge amount of begging, pleading, letter-writing, and sacrificing of Hello Kitty stuffed toys to the deities of the Land of the Rising Sun.

My poor Hello Kitty collection never did recover, by the way.

Nowadays, however, companies like NIS America exist to see that we humble Americans get some love too. Showing their support for fans of alchemy-infused RPG gaming, NIS America is hard at work prepping what will be the third Atelier title to be released over here, Atelier Iris 3: Grand Fantasm. While the preview copy that found its way into my lap is obviously an early build, it is clear to see that said fans of the series can take comfort in knowing that the heart and soul of this game is still classic Atelier. Since part two, however, it seems our dear Iris has paid a visit to a sorcerer packing a spellbook of magical makeovers.

First is the RPG upgrade that I'll never tire of seeing: the end of random battles. While the previous game sought to lessen the annoyance of the classic RPG tradition, Atelier Iris 3 drop-kicks the entire idea into the nearest bottomless pit. Instead, slime-like creatures are used as visual representations of monster encounters in the various worlds of the game, and their color will tell you how hard the fight would



be compared to your current level. For the blue encounters—monsters that are weaker than you—you can even dispatch them with a swing of your sword without ever having to be whisked away to a battle scene.

When you do end up facing off against one of the game's many fiends, you'll find a battle system that has been upgraded from previous outings. Turns in combat are now determined by the new Active Cost Card Battle system, which deals cards representing you, your opponents, and various other events. By pulling off well timed attacks or actions, you can re-shuffle the cards to give yourself better strategic positioning. You can also gain the upper hand by making use of Bust Chains, where your characters are sent into a sort of hyper-powered mode by successfully pulling off enough attacks in succession.

Atelier Iris 3 won't just have new features to show in combat, however. Taking a cue from what's become a

popular trend in RPGs lately, the game looks to center heavily around a guild house, offering players the chance to choose for themselves what next to tackle. Expeditions will vary from simple fetch quests to more involving tasks, and the rewards to be earned will put money in your pocket, experience in your stats, and ingredients into Iris's smelting cauldron for some alchemic fun. **play**

Atelier Iris 3: Grand Fantasm

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Gust
Publisher	NIS America
Online/Multi	NA
Available	May 2007



"First is the RPG upgrade that I'll never tire of seeing: the end of random battles."



The special effects hit strong and often.



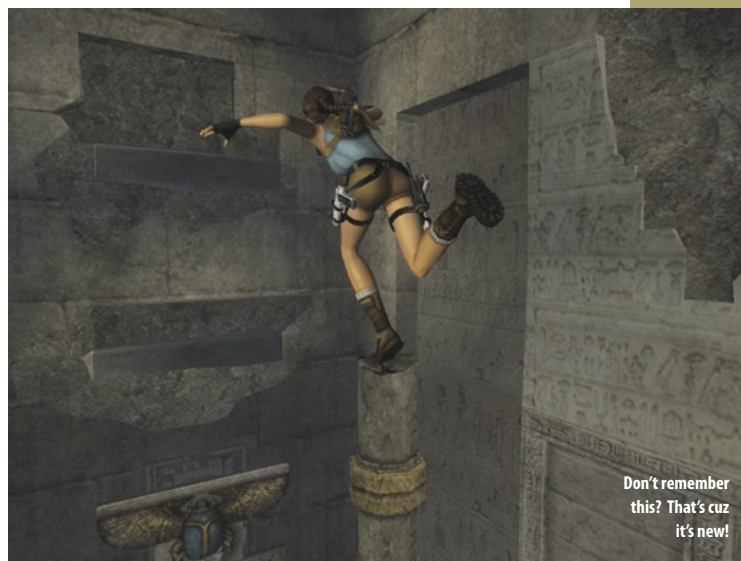
It's nice to be the beholder.

Tomb Raider Anniversary

Happy Anniversary

words Dave Halverson

Since taking over Tomb Raider, Crystal Dynamics have reinvented one of gaming's most esteemed franchises—no small order—by skillfully redesigning the first lady of gaming and building a game around her that capitalized on everything the series stood for while reinvigorating it with their own wonderful devices. For their next trick they'll be celebrating Lara's 10th with a sparkling redux, before embarking on the first next-gen Tomb Raider. We caught up with Creative Director, Jason Botta for some pre-hands-on Q&A...



Don't remember this? That's cuz it's new!

interview

Creative Director, Jason Botta

play: Why remake the original game (not that we're not doing backflips) before getting started on a true next gen sequel?

Jason Botta: The original idea was to celebrate 10 years of Tomb Raider and Lara herself by bringing out a new Tomb Raider adventure inspired by the first game. We also looked at the people and the tools we had at the end of Legend and realized that we had a great starting point to make another fantastic PS2 game while the rest of the studio ramped up our next gen pipeline.

How religious to the original is TA? Are you taking any liberties other than graphical, camera, and control refinements?

TR:A is not a straight remake by any means of the term. A majority of the game is directly inspired by what existed in the original TR, but we've cut some of the more uninteresting bits, added new areas to keep things fresh, and obviously expanded and enhanced those areas that are updated versions of their predecessors. I think fans of TR1 will easily find most of the game--especially all the really memorable sections--very familiar, but at the same time different enough that it clearly doesn't feel like a simple rehashing of the old experience.

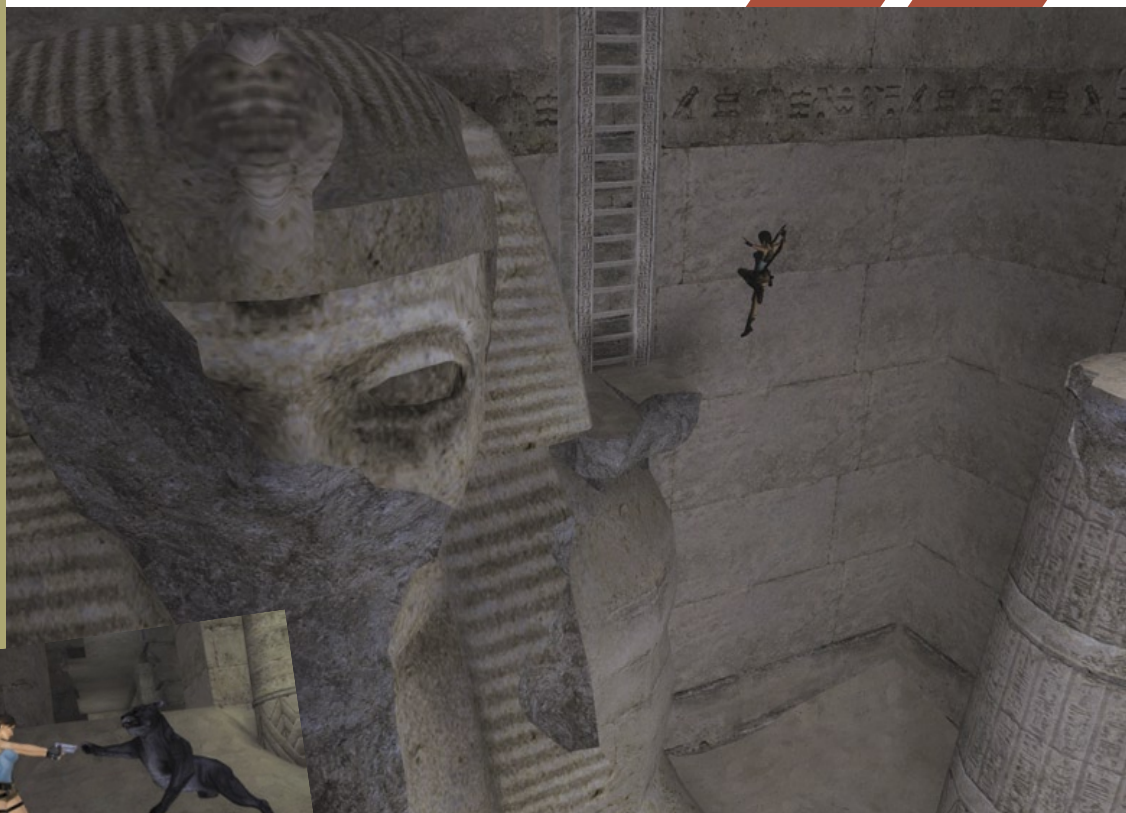
I'll never forget two things about the original—my first plunge down the waterfall and the music. Are both similar to the original?

The waterfall is much more grand this time around so the plunge is even better than before! We even put in a special camera so when you swan dive off of it you get the exact angle you did in TR1.

The music has been completely redone but has been faithfully adapted from the original score. We kept the usage of music very similar to the original where there were long stretches of just moody ambience before select bits of orchestration kick in to amplify the user's situation.

What about dialogue? Is the game fully voiced?

The script for the game has been completely rewritten and newly voiced. There is A LOT more content this time around with regard to story. We provide a lot more detail about both the history and



“The waterfall is much more grand this time around so the plunge is even better than before!”

~Jason Botta, Creative Director, Crystal Dynamics

**Egyptian overhaul:
Give her enough
rope...**



motivations of the characters and overall just flesh out a lot of ambiguous events that occurred in the original.

Does the team have a favorite level?

That depends on who you ask; we all have our favorites and for different reasons. My personal favorite changes each week as new things come online and each area gets more fun/better looking than the other. Right now, I'd have to say it's a tie between Egypt and Greece, but really, they're all a blast to play.

So, after next gen TR... Gex 3 right?

Just do it! How bout a 2.5D Gex for PSP? C'mon, you have to admit-it would be insanely cool. Please?

Anything is possible but I haven't heard anything myself.

No? Eidos told me to tell you...

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

preview

System(s)	PlayStation 2, PC
Developer	Crystal Dynamics
Publisher	Eidos
Available	May 21

Wing Island

Konami steps up with another Wii exclusive

at E3 2006, I stood in line with the rest of the world to play the Nintendo Wii. After hours of slow progression,

I made it to the sweet, cool walls of the Wii demonstration room and played my new favorite console.

After testing out the ubiquitous Wii Sports, a young professional Nintendo representative escorted me to an arcade-style flight simulator, which was supposed to be a part of the WiiSports package. Handling the controller like a paper airplane, I soared over wind-currents, and fell in love with the sense of flight and freedom.

I haven't played my favorite game of E3 since. It's disappeared, perhaps to someday resurface as PilotWiings or something.

But it looks like I wasn't the only one disappointed by the games' silent absence from the Wii lineup, as Hudson Soft has taken it upon themselves to make a flight-sim game that controls exactly like my beloved E3 title. Called Wing Island, it's part sim, part mission based flier and part tech demo. This is not an adventure, regardless of what the cut scenes would have you believe. This is an opportunity to demonstrate a new kind of flight control

on the Wii, and on that level the game succeeds entirely. Those looking for a rich, nuanced action game or a deep flight sim might not be so happy playing Wing Island. But for casual gamers with dreams of flight, the clouds above beckon lazily.

There are no violent air clashes on Wing Island. You are the pilot of an old-fashioned plane (aircraft variations range from slow and stoic to light and fragile), and your small company of do-gooders gets missions from the island's inhabitants. Taking care of anything from photography to light bombing runs, this gaggle of heroes fly either solo or in formation to help out wherever they can.

Oddly, everyone is a bird, begging the question of why technology for airplane flight evolved. Furthermore, their language is frighteningly similar to that of The Muppet Show's Beaker, and consists of beeps and honks ... which forces one to ask how exactly their linguistic structure functions.

These esoteric ponderings aside, Wing Island is shaping up to be an engaging flight game. Somewhere between genuine fun and simple novelty, the game seems great in short bursts, but whether it holds up over the long haul is yet to be determined. **play**



"This is an opportunity to demonstrate a new kind of flight control on the Wii, and on that level the game succeeds entirely."

Killer red balloons at twelve o'clock! Fire, fire, fire!



Wing Island	
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Hudson Soft
Publisher	Konami
Online/Multi	2-player vs.
Available	March



YOUR ENEMIES COME IN ALL DIFFERENT
SHAPES AND SIZES...



...FORTUNATELY, SO DO YOU.



VALHALLA KNIGHTS

How will you play?

xseed JKS
GAMES

www.xseedgames.com

An endlessly customizable adventure for your PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) system. Choose your race, your job, and your equipment, then explore incredible 3D environments or team up for wireless multiplayer Co-op or Vs. challenges.



© 2007 Marvelous Interactive Inc. "PlayStation", "PS" Family logo, and "PSP" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Memory Stick Duo™ may be required (sold separately). The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.

PSP
PlayStation Portable



Looney Tunes Acme Arsenal

preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, Wii	Publisher	Warner Bros. Interactive Ent.
Developer	RedTribe	Available	Fall

this fall, Looney Tunes and next-generation gaming (when can we start calling it current gen by the way?) will converge for the first time in Acme Arsenal, starring Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Foghorn Leghorn, Tasmanian Devil, Marvin the Martian, Gossamer and a special secret character (we're guessing Yosemite Sam). Spanning such familiar ground as Camelot, Ancient Egypt, Mars, the Wild West, and the trenches of World War II, the game consists of combat, puzzle solving, and vehicle-based action capitalizing on the irreverent humor and wild imagination that has transcended generations and graced a pile of games.

We're not sure yet how the two versions will vary

but with any luck they'll take advantage of their respective platform's features. Of these three screens, the dragon blowing fire is said to be 360, although as you can see there is no visible difference compared to the other screens, which would suggest that either RedTribe are masters of the Wii or directly porting the 360 version... We think it's more likely that someone has their wires crossed. Either way this is one incredible looking game. *Dave Halverson*



Heatseeker

preview

System(s)	Wii, PSP, PS2	Publisher	Coedmasters
Developer	IR Gurus	Available	March

i think there's a war or some major conflict involving terrorists or something like that going on in Heatseeker, but I was more concerned figuring out the Wii controls to effectively blow stuff up when I played through the first few levels of this "aerial combat" game. The fighter jet can be controlled by either guiding it to converge to where you spot a point on the screen, or by the much more satisfying way of tilting the nunchuck. Bombs and missiles are activated with the simple push of a button.

If authenticity is your thing, look forward to 12 craft, most of them licensed from Lockheed Martin and Boeing, including modern and more futuristic models. As many as 40 weapon types comprise your payload, and if you want to spruce up your jet, you can

pick from 20 skins and make the mass destruction that much more stylized.

In such locations as the Caribbean, Southern Ocean and Far East, the combat will focus on air and ground strikes, with an impact cam cutting away to your destruction. Get off enough destructive force, and you'll leave deformed scars on the terrain. *Brady Fiechter*





Tenchu Z

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	FROM Software	Available	Spring

With FROM software's latest foray into the Tenchu universe they hope to eliminate the series inherent camera issues while creating expansive prefectures rife with possibility on top of allowing players to create their own Ninja. We'll miss Rikimaru and especially Ayame but if the character creation is comprehensive enough this could be hot. Of course it will all come down to the AI and control. Stealth is a tricky business. **DH**

Two Worlds

System(s)	PC, Xbox 360	Publisher	Southpeak
Developer	TopWare Int.	Available	Summer

Las Vegas based TopWare Interactive's Two Worlds is an incredibly ambitious RPG, combining a single player RPG with never before seen freedom, including deep alchemy and character development systems, with an adaptable world (choices matter) and an up to 8-player campaign. Then they went and added an MMORPG mode on top of that! Seems like a safe bet to us. **DH**



Legend of the Dragon

System(s)	PS2, PSP	Publisher	Game Factory
Developer	Neko Entertainment	Available	May

The Game Factory has thus far carved out a place in the gaming kingdom via children's wares and kid cartoon licenses but now they're reaching beyond their safe haven into the world of T rated fighters. Based on the upcoming cartoon, Legend of the Dragon the game is built around animal-human hybrid fighters based on the Chinese zodiac. **DH**



Ninja Gaiden Sigma

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Team Ninja
Developer	Tecmo	Available	Spring

It took Itagaki the better part of a decade to sculpt the first 3D Ninja Gaiden; an action masterpiece that stands as the pinnacle of ultra refined action gaming reserved for the most elite gamers. Entering its third adaptation having gone from the original to Black, Sigma stands as the ultimate directors cut featuring a PS3 graphics overhaul, new levels, in-game mods galore, and unless I'm dreaming Rachel as a playable character *tear of joy runs down cheek*. Beating a dead horse? Nah; more like feeding it a bag of steroids. **DH**



ShadowRun

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	FASA Studio	Available	Fall

Shadow Run does not, I repeat, does not contain a single player campaign. Known as a cyber punk adventure/rpg it's also now an FPS. ...From a single-player cyber punk action RPG to a 16-player FPS over Live...that had to be a tough sell. Whether you're pinging your Live buddies in celebration or grieving that you'll never delight in filling this man-beast full of lead, there's no denying that his sandals are too small and in serious need of a toe strap...no way those babies are staying on. **DH**





RACING FORECAST 2007

One small step for gaming; one giant leap for sofa sloths

More so than any single genre, racing has become the barometer for each step up the technology ladder. Hot from the arcade, it all began at the heyday of 3D when getting the clipping out of Daytona for the Sega Saturn seemed all but impossible. Next came realistic reflections (at one time they were tacked on like stickers) followed by dynamics such as weather, realistic physics, in-car animation, car deformation, and finally demolition as Burnout burst onto the scene. Motor Storm achieved the most recent benchmark, conquering real-time track deformation... So what's next? As you'll see and read here, aside from the latest graphics kick, today's racers have become near perfect simulations and are about to spread out in league with Test Drive Unlimited and beyond, as we delve into driver DNA, trading and making purchases online. All of that aside however, one thing has remained a constant: Gamers like to go fast as often as possible. If you build it better we will come, conquer, and wait patiently for the next go round. Let the parade begin.

MEMORY LANE

Top 10 racers we'd like to see more of

We realize some of these have had sequels in which case we are referring to the fact that we'd like more still, in which case we've listed our favorite so far. In other words, these all deserve next-genification™.

01. Stunt Race FX SNES Argonaut/Nintendo 1994
02. Motor Toon GP PlayStation SCEA 1996
03. Rally Cross PlayStation SCEA 1997
04. Jet Moto PlayStation SingleTrac/SCEA 1996
05. Quantum Redshift Xbox Curly Monsters/Microsoft 2002
06. Wacky Racers Dreamcast Atari 2000
07. Wave Race N64 Nintendo 1996
08. Excite Bike 64 N64 Left Field/Nintendo 2000
09. Downhill Domination PS2 Incognito/SCEA 2003
10. Road Rash 3DO EA 1994

What's missing

Hello? Next-gen cart-racing please report for duty...
Paging all franchise creatures...

2007 RACING PREVIEW

Colin McRae: DIRT

PC, PS3, Xbox 360 Codemasters June

DIRT is the first game being created using Codemasters Studios' proprietary engine, **Neon**: a meat-eating powerhouse of an engine that will drive the next generation of the series' impeccable car handling, incredibly detailed vehicles and fantastic living environments. 30 technical experts have been on the job for going on two years creating rally cars' most sublime racer yet.



RACING FORECAST 2007

Motor Storm

PS3, Evolution Studios for SCEA March



The reigning king of off-road racers; don't expect anyone to come close to knocking MS off anytime soon. Rather, might I suggest simply basking in every nook and cranny of this altogether superior racing mélange; a testament to the prowess of both the PS3 and Evolution Studios who better be either making us a sequel or a motocross game as we speak.

Project Gotham 4

Xbox 360 Bizarre Creations for Microsoft TBA 2007



We had to jump through hoops just to get this screen shot....now you want details? Fine, here's what we know so far: Microsoft's premier racing franchise will feature a new dramatic weather system, an improved Kudos reward system and the ability for players to join a global racing community on Xbox Live, aside from driving the world's most iconic vehicles from top manufacturers. ...That's all for now. But who needs details when you can stare at the rain beading up on the rear window?

F1 06 (see page 47)

PS3 SCEE Out Now



Gran Turismo HD Concept

PS3 SCEI 2007

The series' first Ferrari and realistic 1080p HD visuals are only the beginning: In another first, Gran Turismo HD Concept's Time Trial will offer an online rankings system. For the first time, players will be able to track who the best Gran Turismo driver is, and with over 247 million copies sold, expect the competition to be fierce. The deepest racer in gaming is about to become even more of an abyss.



Forza Motorsport 2

Xbox 360 Microsoft May



Taking online functionality to new virtual heights; Forza Motorsport 2's online global auction house will let players buy, sell and trade (using in-game credits) one-of-a-kind vehicles with other Forza fans, encouraging patrons to share their unique whips, or complete their car collection from a roster of over 300 rides. Car tuners and painters should be dancing in the virtual streets.

Test Drive Unlimited

PS2, PSP Melbourne House for Atari March

Atari's somehow shoe-horned 1500km of painstakingly rendered Hawaiian island, including 1600km of diverse open roads, into the PS2, delivering a fully streaming racing experience with no loading times. It's not as pretty as the 360 game but by PS2 standards it's one gorgeous open M.O.O.R.™. The PSP and PS2 versions also feature 'Quick Race'; an instant-play mode allowing busy players to generate a limitless number of challenges. PSP players can even connect to a server via WiFi, for the full online experience.



Fatal Inertia

Xbox 360, PS3 Koei June

Billed as an evolutionary mix of street racing, rally racing, and demolition derby where futuristic machines do battle in pristine natural environments; Fatal Inertia looks more like the offspring of Gran Chaser and Wipeout to us. Thankfully we won't have to wait much longer to find out what Koei's first racer is really all about.



Burnout 5

PS3, Xbox 360 Criterion for EA September

Reinvention is the name of the game with B5. Welcome to Paradise City, where the grass is green and the girls are pretty... unlike the competition as you break all the rules within the all-new seamless racing battleground; a massive infrastructure of traffic-heavy roads to abuse. "Gone is the need to jump in and out of menus and aimlessly search for fun like many open world games; in Burnout 5, every inch of the world is built to deliver heart-stopping Burnout-style gameplay. Every intersection is a potential crash junction and every alleyway is an opportunity to rack up moving violations." Where'd I put those car keys...?



play favorites

For what it's worth, here's how the **play** editors' all-time favorites break down. A lack of time and or patience coupled with a penchant for fantasy is painfully evident.



01. Mario Kart 64 N64
 02. Ridge Racer Type 4 PS
 03. Motor Storm PS3
 04. Wave Race N64
 05. Motor Toon GP PS
 06. Burnout Revenge Xbox 360
 07. Excitebike 64 N64
 08. Moto GP 2006 Xbox 360
 09. Downhill Domination PS2
 10. Wacky Races DC
- Sentimental Favorite: Stunt Race FX

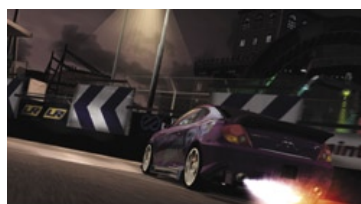


Burnout Dominator

PSP, PS2 Criterion for EA March



Besides the usual traffic battles, adrenaline junkies get an all-new world tour with Dominator taking place across all-new tracks built for every style of racing from drifting to claustrophobic urban traffic zones. And if that's not enough to float your destruction boat the game's soundtrack will include the world premiere of Avril Lavigne's new "Girlfriend" along with a selection from Jane's Addiction and Army of Anyone.



Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights

Xbox 360, PS3, PS2, PSP, NDS, PC THQ August

Yet another urban sprawl to abuse; the new Juiced is now fortified with essential vitamins. Forget for a second that the title Hot Import Nights is cheesier than a box of Wayans Brothers DVDs and focus on the true nature of this HIN simulation. All the excitement of performing at a Hot Import Nights event is here, allowing players to compete in races all over the world in front of huge and reactive HIN crowds. Customization is key, including the deepest tuning and modding ever, real cities and even driver DNA tracking over 100 attributes. Be all that you can be; just go kicky fast and hang on to those pink slips yo.

RACING FORECAST 2007

Moto GP 2007

Strap on your skid lid...

words Dave Halverson

m

oto GP 2006 (our racing game of the year) was and is a truly great game although Climax did leave room for improvement.

For one the all important connection between the pits and rider has never been exhibited in the series. Will we finally see the mechanics trackside flashing their instructions? Will there be active pits? These questions and more will be answered in next month's interview. It was to be this month's interview/reveal if not for the games public relations contact at THQ simultaneously forgetting about our deadline and dropping off the face of the Earth. I hope he's okay. Moving on; for now, as to not tarnish the pending interview, all I can say is that the list of refinements and additions is a long one. Generally speaking the game boasts

hugely improved visuals, improved AI (with realistic collision avoidance, human error, improved realistic rider bunching, and realistic AI cornering), improved accessibility (bike handling model, more visual feedback for riders, new challenges and tutorials, sector breakdown map, and a better reward system) and a new 800cc class. With any luck THQ will find there man by three weeks time and we'll bring you the proper feature in our May issue.



"...all I can say is that the list of refinements and additions is a long one."



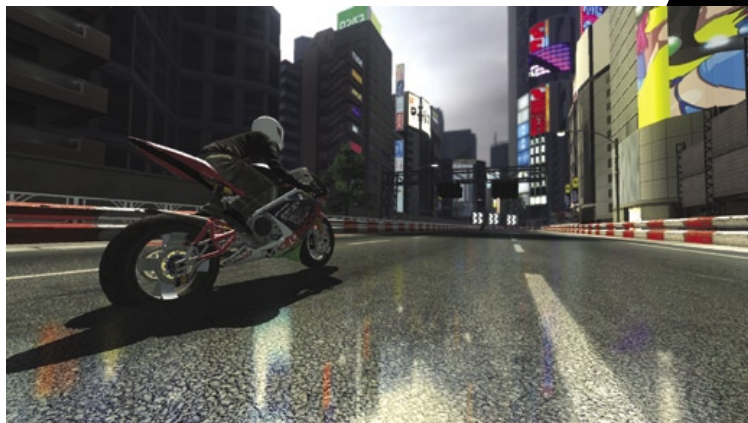
Check the gas truck: Last year's game had no such trackside detail.

Like Madden Football, the way to win gamers over with the same basic premise year after year is through new technology and innovative gameplay, and with Moto GP for 2007 Climax is going overboard on both fronts.

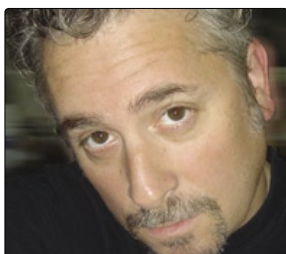
Moto GP 2007

preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Climax
Publisher	THQ
Available	Summer



play Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, and open-world
Now playing: Crackdown, Odin Sphere, Metal Slug Anthology PSP, Castlevania Chronicles, Monster Madness, Bullet Witch, Kameo EoP
Top 2 Developers: Rare, Ubisoft Montreal (I miss Smilebit!)

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

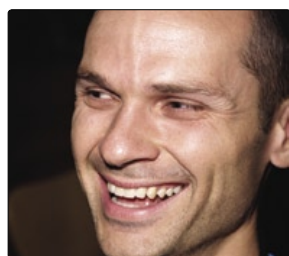


Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Gundam Musou, FFX&TAU
Top 2 Developers: Nintendo Entertainment Analysis and Development, Square Product Development Division 1

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

TMNT 038
Super Paper Mario 040
SSX Blur 042
Sonic and the Secret Rings 043
God of War II 044
Brave: Search for Spirit Dancer 046
fiOw 047
F1 Championship Edition 047



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Crackdown, God of War II, Mario Kart 64
Top 2 Developers: Capcom, Nintendo

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Taoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, humming-bird simulators
Now playing: Crackdown, Labyrinth of the World Tree, Lost Planet
Top 2 Developers: Capcom, tri-Crescendo

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.



Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: The Warriors PSP, GRAW 2, Crackdown
Top 2 Developers: Bioware, Lionhead

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: WoW: Burning Crusade, Lumines II, Chocobo Tales
Top 2 Developers: Team Silent, Team ICO

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Reviews

April 2007



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Battlefield 2142: Northern Strike, Immortal Throne
Top 2 Developers: Treasure, Valve

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: Zelda: Twilight Princess, Super Paper Mario 2, Final Fantasy III DS
Top 2 Developers: Square Enix, Capcom

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heather's been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

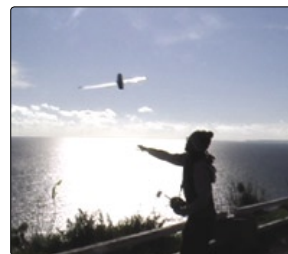


God of War 2

p. 044

The play rating system

- 10...Perfect
- 9...Extraordinary
- 8...Great
- 7...Good
- 6...Decent
- 5...Average
- 4...Below average
- 3...Poor
- 2...Bad
- 1...Terrible



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: fiOw, Zelda TP, Q*bert
Top 2 Developers: Nintendo, Namco

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Time to find your inner Turtle

words Dave Halverson



dilemma: You've got 12 months to develop a game worth the TMNT namesake based on a feature film that looks like

the second coming of bipedal teenage reptiles of the Testudine order. Solution: Toss everything overboard except for the one thing the series has always been missing—platforming. If not for Montreal Studios' legions of insanely talented developers specializing in every facet of the process, such a feat could never be achieved (let alone a pair of 5-plus-hour

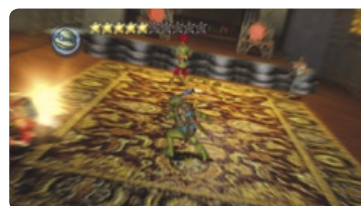
games across two consoles) but thankfully they got the nod. If I didn't know better I'd say the game took 18-24 months.

The only telltale signs are the lack of HD support, diversity, and refinements for the 360 version. Otherwise, the game's length—approximately 5 ½ hours to beat the game's 16 approximately 20-minute levels (app. 60% of the entire package)—is certainly impressive given the dev time; and the bonus content, downright unexpected.

TMNT does only 2 things—platforming and fighting—but it does them so right that the replayability is off the charts.

Like the best action classics of old, the game just feels great: like the first time you messed around with Jim (Earthworm Jim, that is) or Alucard. From the second you begin the game's prologue/tutorial you know that you're in for a rare treat: a pure action romp with 4 of the coolest freaks to ever grace the screen; Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and Michelangelo.

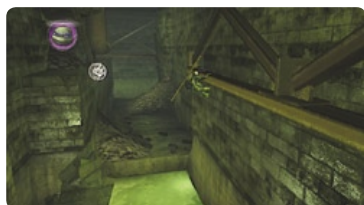
Told in narrative leading up to and through the events of the new film, TMNT is the picture of precision control merged with series-endemic hi-jinx. Gone are the one-dimensional cel-shaded turtles of old,





"TMNT does only 2 things—platforming and fighting—but it does them so right that the replayability is off the charts."

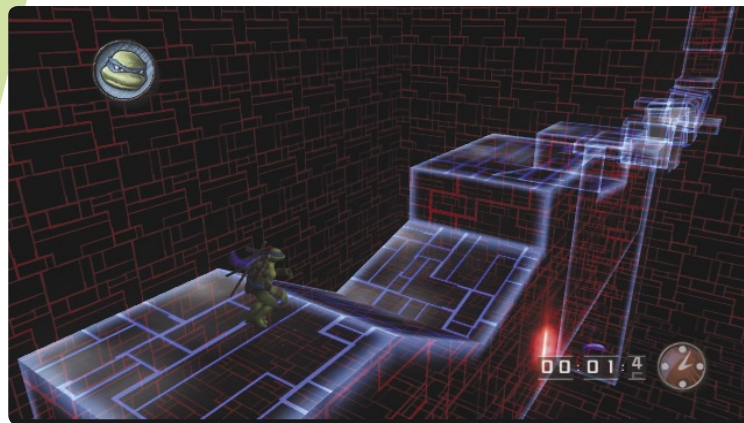
Double your fun: Ranking high enough in each stage unlocks the Challenge for that area.



replaced by frolicking brothers who can't keep their collective mouths shut as you assail each magnificent sprawl. It's like they're in the room as you conquer every last platforming staple in the handbook, looking as spectacular as possible in the process as you scour sky scrapers, sewers, jungles and more. Once you're into the meat of the game, teamwork becomes key; building up the requisite gauges to call on your brothers for assistance. During melee exchanges, uninterrupted combos lead to fury attacks and residual gauge energy can be used to trigger sibling-specific buddy moves; especially key in boss battles. The same applies on the platforming side, performing mid-air

throws to clear otherwise impassable chasms. Raph's Nightcrawler levels offer the game's biggest diversity, presented in grayscale with the odd colored graffiti, fire, and such (neat stuff) but otherwise don't come looking for anything but pure uninterrupted arcade fun.

I'd kill for a handful of these a year; ongoing series that just kept bringing the fun year in and year out. It's unfortunate that they didn't have a little more time for a Nightcrawler bike level or to dress up the 360 version a little more (it's had a texture pass but the Turtles' shells should be normal-mapped at the very least) but what's here I'm thankful for. As a big fan of the old TMNT I couldn't take another



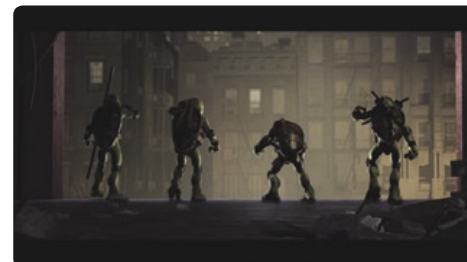
cel-shaded beat-'em-up; not after seeing this amazing homage to the Turtles of old. Here's to Ubisoft's tenure in Turtle town.

TMNT

Score **8.5**

- + Great looking on all three platforms; loads of pick up and play fun
- Very little diversity. 360 version not as refined as it could be.

System(s)	Wii, PlayStation 2, Xbox 360
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	NA
Available	March 20
ESRB Rating	E 10+



Super Paper Mario

A plumber's story

words Heather Campbell

It's been a while since I've thought that a game was beautiful. Four months, at least. For a girl with a short attention span, that's a seemingly unending drought. I spent the last four months being pleased, but rarely moved, as if stuck in a desert of sufficient intentions and merely agreeable game-scapes. The first thing I want to say about Super Paper Mario is that it is beautiful. Like a well-designed building, or a slick website, Super Paper Mario is a place you want to hang out in. It feels and looks polished, considerate, and expensive.

Now, Super Paper Mario is a masterpiece of concepts. I can't tell you if it's *fun*, but I can say it's so loaded with ideas that it is absolutely engaging. It's like the difference between pulp and literature; one is instantly gratifying, the other is academically rewarding. Super Paper Mario is a game you study after you've been introduced to game ideas and level design theory. It takes a lot of what we already know about games and builds off of it, as opposed to languishing in a

self-satisfied state of pre-innovation.

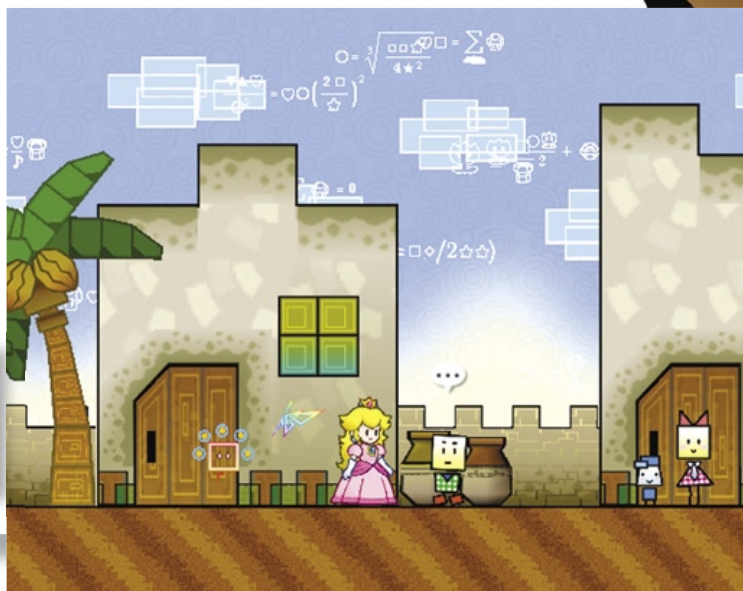
That's a lot of heady stuff for a game that features happy crayon graphics and peppy glockenspiel level jingles.

I believe all of this innovation finds its genesis in a single game-play mechanic. Paper Mario has the ability to transform two-dimensional levels into three-dimensional ones. Suddenly, the 2-D worlds of old Mario titles are rendered with depth, and the structure of the levels themselves is deconstructed. Sometimes, it makes the world easier to navigate. More often, it sullies the simple landscape that we're familiar with, and makes the once elegant world into a nightmare of misplaced bricks and ledges.

It reminds me of The Lost Levels (but with a much lower difficulty level), in that it takes the concepts of Marios previous and tangentially develops the language established within them. The game is more than nostalgic; the nods to retro gaming are like flashbacks that familiarize us with gameplay that we haven't seen in a while.

The problem with Super Paper Mario is that there is a story. It would be weak criticism if I didn't bring this up – the story of SPM gets in the way of the game. With a game so much about the game experience, we don't need a story shoehorned in to pad our progress and exploration. No matter how charming the reveals are, SPM does not need a story. It certainly doesn't need an un-skippable one. Yet every few minutes, the flow of the game is miserably stuttered by some anecdote about Mario or Peach or the

Peach gone wild:
Slumming it in
squaresville.



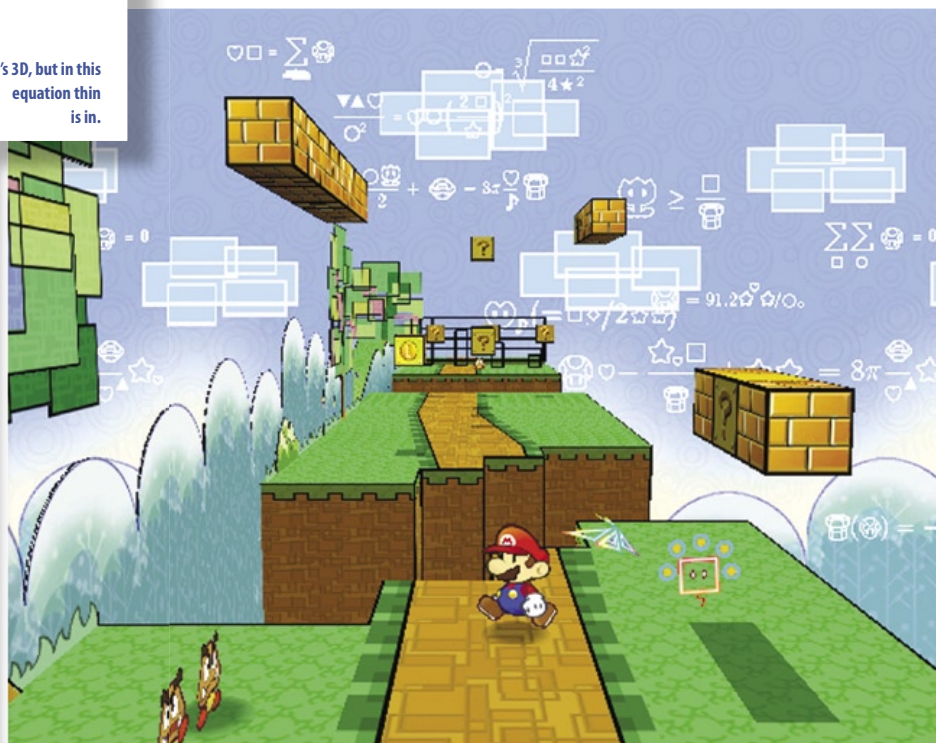
villain, Count Bleck.

Think back to Super Mario 3. There's a story in that game, but it's never *told* to us – we experience it with Mario, by adventuring through levels with him. Super Paper Mario has enough gameplay to do without the story, but the developers have packaged it as a sort of RPG hybrid, and for those in the audience, RPG means long blocks of text. I would so much rather go from level to level without pause, engaging the gorgeous world without waiting for some monster to give a monologue no-one cares about. Super Paper Mario needs a story like a crossword needs platforming elements.

I really want to say that I enjoyed this game. My complaint may be cold, but it is only because the game itself is so close to being grand. More frustrating than the student in class who goofs off all the time, this is the nearly straight-A student with an attention problem. That kid on the edge is more maddening than the one you've given up on.

Maybe someone will like reading about Peach. I don't. Peach is a game play

It's 3D, but in this equation thin is in.

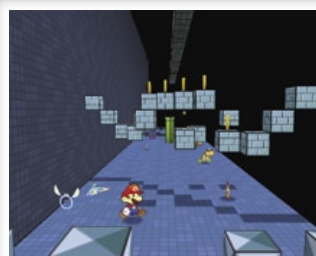


“...the nods to retro gaming are like flashbacks that familiarize us with gameplay that we haven't seen in a while.”



mechanic; she's a tool. Her job is to float from one place to another, when other characters fall with heavy immediacy. Peach is a way to solve a puzzle. The same goes for the Pixls that Mario and Company collect as they move through the world. Each of these Pixls is a new tool for your puzzle tool-belt. Some make you small, some make you heavy, etc. They don't need an un-skippable monologue about their time in the box where you find them. Imagine if the beginning of Super Mario 64 was a drawn out introduction to the story of Mario's three-dimensional moves, and you'll get an idea of how tedious the story gets in Super Paper Mario. Less people would have played SM64 if you had to listen to Mario talk for a minute about the first time he triple jumped before you launched him into the air. And then again when he swam. And when he picked up a box

I absolutely love Super Paper Mario when I get to play it. I hate it when I have to watch. **play**



Super Paper Mario		score
		8.5
+ What a fantastic set of ideas.		
- Stop talking.		
System(s)	Wii	
Developer	Intelligent Systems/Nintendo	
Publisher	Nintendo	
Online/Multi	NA	
Available	April	
ESRB Rating	E	



Dinosaurs on the slopes: yup, it's SSX.



SSX Blur

A new way to take to the slopes

words Brady Fiechter



If I were to play SSX Blur without having enjoyed the other fantastic titles in the series, then I wouldn't be distracted by things like: it doesn't have the same amount of depth. The control scheme just doesn't feel as tactile and appropriate. The courses feel awfully familiar, despite being a little less flashy. The energy level doesn't seem quite as high, the presentation doesn't grab you with as much gusto.

Now let's drop comparisons to past SSX games and talk about how SSX packs a nifty style, plenty of courses and riders and options, a propulsive soundtrack and a visual package that looks as good as you'd be expecting on the Wii. The game is polished, fun, and a worthy addition to the SSX lineup.

At least, worthy if you find yourself enjoying the Wii control scheme, which takes some serious investment to master and completely makes or breaks the experience.

If you're the type of gamer who snickers at tutorials, you're attitude will be abruptly changed as you spend several minutes learning the many movements that must be performed to properly guide your boarder or

skier down the obstacle-laden slopes. This is not a simple game to come to grips with but does reward in time, as you learn to get into the flow of balancing the nunchuck and remote without straining.

I found myself having a great time pulling off tricks and carving the well-designed courses in the early goings—the newness of the Wii does matter—but later on, I started to feel a disconnect with the mechanics. It's not so much the challenge of the game or the accuracy of the Wii controls—EA actually did a fine job with the nuances—as it is a feeling of going through the motions and never fully connecting with the contours and lines of the slopes. I especially grew tired of the ubertricks, which are pulled off by tracing patterns on the screen; these

don't feel like your commanding a boarder as much as doing a little mini game.

You could come down on SSX Blur for wanting more simplicity of control, anticipating that the best games on Wii keep it less spastic. But that's entirely preference, and there will no doubt be gamers who prefer SSX Blur with high praise. **play**

SSX Blur

score **7.0**

+ Looks good, sounds good, slick style; control scheme will be a hit for some...

- ... and big turnoff for others. Starting to feel like there needs to be new direction for the series.

System(s)	Wii
Developer	EA Montreal
Publisher	EA
Online/Multi	1-4 players
Available	February
ESRB Rating	E

Sonic

and the secret

Rings

With any luck, the last 3D Sonic...

words Dave Halverson

The good news is that Sonic Rings is not only fun but one of the best looking games on the Wii thus far; the bad news is that the game would be a whole lot better if it were designed for that beautiful Wii control pad that we all use to control the classics. While the steering sensitivity is perhaps the best it's ever been for a Sonic Team game, the jumping in Rings is, to say the least, peculiar. Tapping the 2 button causes Sonic to hop while holding and releasing—which also causes him to stop—makes him jump higher. Sounds good; works badly. Mid-way through the second area (the game's beautiful Jurassic level) the jumping, combined with the auto-run function, really mucks up the otherwise tolerable works. Tilting back to reverse and pressing 1 to brake are obviously retro-fitted affairs as well. The simple fact is that all of this unneeded complexity could be simply and painlessly grafted onto a control pad for a much better game. My fear with the Wii (which until now has been reserved to ports of games designed for a controller) has always been that developers would simply substitute Wii control for moves better suited to a controller, and this is the first time that a Wii exclusive has fallen into that trap. If you can live with jerking the Wii remote forward to attack and come to grips with

the jumping apparatus and awkward chase sections, Sonic Rings shines otherwise as a return to what made Sonic a hit in the first place: fast, simple action-gameplay at high speeds. It is, believe it or not, nearly glitch free. Non-linearity is where Sonic Team has always shined. By game's end you'll be happy you came—Rings is filled with momentous bosses and plenty of magic moments—but if you're like me you'll be wishing that it was bound to a controller, which would have made Rings like controlling one of the Genesis greats in 3D; sans cameos. How long have we waited? And still—no dice.

As we wrap up this latest batch of Sonic games I feel more strongly than ever that Sega has lost touch with Sonic's fans. The 360 game was a gem sadly plagued by glitches, loading, and control issues that could have and should have been fixed, the PS3 game was an utter tragedy, and Rings is good if not awkwardly adapted to the Wii. The best game of the Sonic era gone by was by far Sonic Rush, for one simple reason: 2D play mechanics with 3D integration. Why Sonic Team doesn't make a next-gen 2D Sonic is nothing short of reckless. It's as if they want Sonic to fizzle and die. You'd think they'd do it for the money but apparently they prefer high budget low return over mid budget high return...they

are a strange bunch. 2D is their strength and imagining what they could do with it on next-gen, well, why bother?

In a time when they should be turning out NIGHTS and 2D Sonic sequels they choose to alter their course, slipping in and out of half-baked sequels and various levels of risky licensed IPs. I hope I never see another 3D Sonic. The 360 game was all the 3D Sonic I'll ever need. It's time to either do the right thing or say goodbye. In a perfect world they'd start working with Treasure again and follow with an original line of next-gen 2D games and reunite Smilebit for more Jet Set and Panzer...imagine that. No, don't. It ain't gonna happen. I'll be counting the days to Golden Axe and will remain loyal to the company that made me love games until the bitter end, or they listen; whichever comes first. **play**

Sonic Rings		score
		7.0
+	Wonderful presentation, great looking levels, cool soundtrack	
-	Jumping and other key controls unresponsive and frustrating	
System(s)	Wii	
Developer	Sonic Team	
Publisher	Sega	
Online/Multi	NA	
Available	Now	
ESRB Rating	E 10+	



Rail grinding: A well worn Sonic staple.



"...the game would be a whole lot better if it were designed for that beautiful Wii control pad ..."

God of War II

The gods aren't playing nice

words Brady Flechter

Kratos is a character of vengeful hatred, a ruthless murderer whose role as the god of war places him in the grips of insanity.

One of God of War 2's great achievements is the way the soul of this character is expressed not just through the tradition of narration, but, in some elegantly abstract way, through the extraordinary whole of the gameplay world. Storytelling of various kinds, visual and spoken and interactive, fluidly work together to make you really feel the presence of Kratos in all his brutality. What a rare and engrossing experience this game is.

God of War 2 doesn't dwell on telling Krato's journey to regain his powers, which have been stripped from him by a devious Zeus. When the game pauses for a brief cinematic, you genuinely want to know what's going on, and quickly you *become* what's going on. Truly emboldening is how the cinematic tapestry moves from passive involvement to incredible, active interaction.

God of War II is not necessarily a big step above God of War, and if there is one area that the sequel might be missing, it's that powerful jolt of newness God of War

provided. But that's not a fault, simply a sequel striving to do as much as it can to survive the comparisons to its original greatness. If someone wants to argue that this is a more complete, polished, and deeper game, they have plenty of evidence.

The foundation of the combat system hasn't changed much, and while a few new moves and weapons have been implemented, you're likely going to feel like you just picked up the controls at the tail end of God of War. The effect of fighting is the same—empowering, gruesome, and extraordinarily fluid and tactile. Instead of offering up a dramatically different core of action, God of War II is more focused on far more intense boss battles, denser puzzles and a world that is even more adventurous and visually alive.

It would have been one thing to simply add in Krato's new powers, like grappling and flying with the Pegasus wings, and say, "Look, look, we have grappling and flying with the Pegasus wings!" These are more invaluable entrance points that sweep you in to the God of War world than mere mechanics to up the variety. God of War II's world requires more



complex, dynamic interaction—more multidimensional climbing and swinging and object manipulation that make it all feel that much more like an actual place you are caught up in.

As a huge fan of the original, I'm reminded again why God of War struck me as such a staggering achievement. Again, Kratos becomes a character with an emotional center that actually matters to the raw, visceral push of the gameplay. He's not a likeable character, but an empowering vessel to live out a primal instinct. It feels good to brutalize the monsters that pollute this striking mythological setting, to rip them from limb to limb, to be thrust in the air by their giant forms, coming down with blades of fury to tear them apart. There is not a game out there that takes you this close to an expression of rage. **play**

God of War II constantly thrills with its presentation.



“Kratos becomes a character with an emotional center that actually matters to the raw, visceral push of the gameplay.”



God of War II

score **9.5**

- + The richness of the gameplay experience matches the awesome visuals
- A minor complaint, but the world could use some contrast, and some puzzles are arbitrary

System(s)	PS2
Developer	Sony Santa Monica
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	M
Available	March

Brave

The Search for Spirit Dancer

Nature (finally) calls

words Dave Halverson

brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer (originally reviewed in our August 2006 issue) is finally making its way to retail. What took so long? Your guess is as good as ours but at least it's not another Red Star. The good news is that PS2 practitioners are once again on the receiving end of an original mini-epic; one more great little game for the PS2's swollen archives. The story is a good one, following young Brave as he endeavors to find Spirit Dancer, the only shaman powerful enough to send the resident hellion back from whence it came after turning Brave's tribe into zombies, kidnapping his parents and turning the tribe's powerful shaman against him.

Brave is the picture of no-nonsense 3D game design; a wonderfully exaggerated fantasy that merges Native American mysticism with a myriad of budding play mechanics and level devices that never let up or grow tiring. Rather than infuse the game with the usual artificial sweeteners to drive it over the 10-hour mark VIS get right to business and never let up, delivering 6-8 hours of unsullied fun. As Brave crosses the vast wilderness, braving raging rivers, rustic canyons, clammy caves and fields of fire and ice he must become one with nature to fulfill his destiny. Making fire, learning to fish, becoming an archer, negotiating rapids, and possessing animals make Brave an altogether unique experience, not so much by the deeds themselves but in the way they're executed. The gameplay is quite extraordinary in that few things about Brave

remind me of anything else. Like all of the best platforming adventures the game stands on its own. VIS certainly put a lot of work into separating their first such game from the pack. That it's not been marketed at all or ported to 360 (or better yet Wii—it's the perfect Wii game) is beyond strange.

I'd forgotten how neat a game Brave was, and how well executed, from the visuals to the pacing to the voice acting, so reliving it for the third time was truly a joy. Back in August I scored it an 8.5 and although it more than holds up the category has progressed since, so I'm going with an 8.0. Games of this ilk are a rare gift regardless of any number, but with Okami and God of War 2 on the shelves, I'll be hard pressed to give any PS2 action game anything above an 8.0 anytime soon.

Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer

score **8.0**

+ Wonderful character design and fresh gameplay abounds along with a great soundtrack and first-rate voice acting.

- Comes in under 10 hours, if you consider that a negative... which you shouldn't.

System(s) PlayStation 2

Developer VIS Entertainment

Publisher Southpeak

Online/Multi NA

Available Now

ESRB Rating E 10+



"I'd forgotten how neat a game Brave was, and how well executed, from the visuals to the pacing to the voice..."

One of Brave's many unique scenarios...



Formula One Championship Edition

score 9.0

Now open (wheel) for business

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Multi	Yes
Developer	Studio Liverpool	Available	Now
Publisher	SCEA	ESRB Rating	E 10+

I've waited a long time for the feeling to return...I know it sounds silly in this day and age but to date my fondest F1 memories were playing Monaco GP on the Sega Genesis. There was something about the way the game made me feel back then that was like being there. Over the years technology has seen the F1 genre forge ahead but I never felt both that old feeling of being there, combined with superior technology—not until now. Studio Liverpool have not only created the ultimate balance between sim and arcade controls but they've done so in a way that is just forgiving enough, allowing racing fans across the board to enjoy the thrill of open wheel racing. F1 CE is not a stuffy sim although it is mode complete, nor is it a silly arcade racer. It's the picture of modern F1 gaming, with just the right amount of everything all wrapped in an

ultra high-tech package. Progressive damage, super real lighting and weather effects, and full surround audio make it the vision of next-gen; great gameplay makes it incredibly addicting fun, and six-axis control makes it unique. **Dave Halverson**



"It's the picture of modern F1 gaming..."



Virtual rain doesn't get any wetter.

Flow

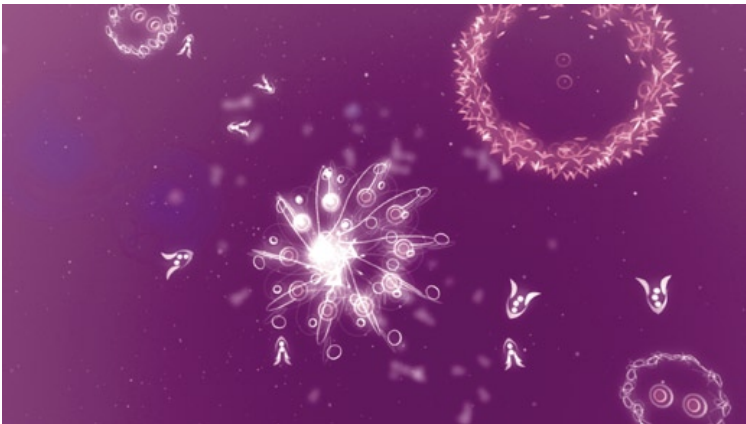
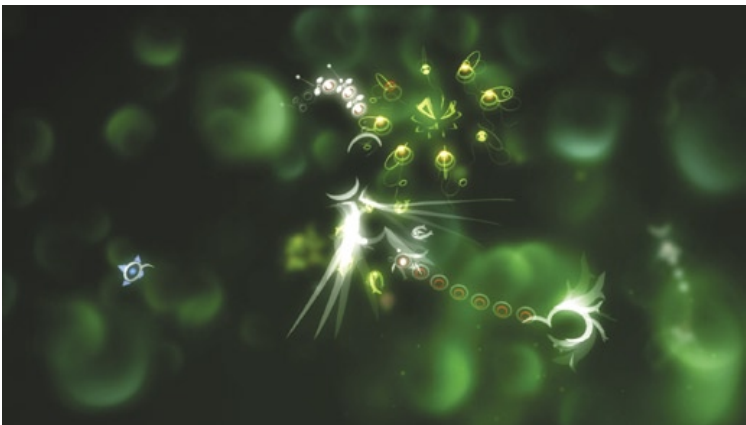
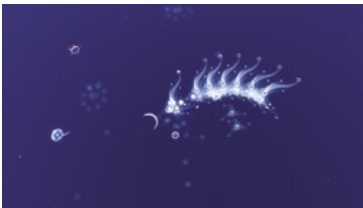
score 7.5

Now available at a head shop near you

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Multi	1-2 player
Developer	that game company	Available	Now
Publisher	SCEA	ESRB Rating	E

When I first played FLOW, I kept waiting to discover a pattern or mechanic or obstacle that fit the mold of typical gameplay engagement. I assumed there had to be something in there that I was missing, but there's not: FLOW is meant to be savored as a relaxed experience of absorbing movement and imagery. It can only take you so far before feeling a little too purposeless, but FLOW should be praised for escaping convention without feeling like an empty experiment. Swimming through the liquid-like space with the motion-sensing movement of the Sixaxis becomes hypnotic and effortless, as you guide your alien organism to its meal of bite-sized cells. The creature grows and changes form the deeper you travel into the oceanic expanse, which darkens and visually shifts to reflect a

process of evolution. Indigenous life endeavors to destroy parts of your creature the farther down you go, offering the only real sense of urgency and conflict FLOW has to offer. Even in these moments of confrontation, there is a continuing serenity to the experience that is the major source of appeal. You can only take so much away from FLOW before the effect wears off, but until then, it's a treat that hopefully will inspire more for the future. **Brady Fiechter**



Didn't I see this in sex education?

new studios for a better tomorrow

How dynamic new publishers and studios will help change the face of gaming

words Dave Halverson



the more gaming parallels the world of filmmaking the closer we get to a tiered marketplace; one in which blockbusters are offset by more and more original titles. Games that appeal to a smaller niche, large enough to make the game a success based on smaller budgets and teams. Like film however that doesn't mean a sacrifice in

quality. On the contrary these smaller games may be more prone to innovation and risk taking similar to avant-garde film. For gaming to truly mirror film and become a staple of American entertainment, games must begin to represent a wider base. Like in film a smaller studio game may not have the big stars (a.k.a. licensed characters) but that often leads to new ideas and even genres. Before Guitar Hero was a sensation it was a risky new idea. As gamers of the late '80s and '90s mature, there's a need for more variety; games that mirror the past while bringing their respective genres into the future, on top of today's modern blockbusters. It's also high time that gamers who never knew console 2D get a taste of its allure. None of this can happen without a small studio system. Here's how five such studios plan to make a difference. It's important to point out beforehand that the games I'd like to see from these studios do not represent my overall taste in games. It's merely an overlooked aspect of gaming I'd like to see bridge the gap. I love the blockbusters as much as anybody, as long as they're great games first. What I miss is the adventure and pioneering spirit that gaming lost in translation making the wobbly leap from 2D to 3D...

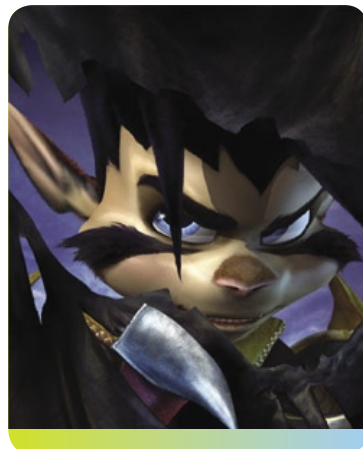
"As gamers of the late '80s and '90s mature, there's a need for more variety..."

meet the publishers

About Throwback



In 2006, Throwback Entertainment acquired an extensive library of titles originally published by Acclaim Entertainment and intends to provide consumers with new versions of select games taking advantage of modern and next-generation devices and hardware (Vexx and Fur Fighters please!). Such notable franchises now owned by Throwback include Re-Volt, Extreme G Racing, Vexx, Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance, Fur Fighters, and many more. More recently the company recruited David Siller (best known for his work on Crash Bandicoot, Maximo, and Aero the Acrobat) as its VP of Development, so get ready for a flood of amazing original games that play like the wind.



**GAMECOCK
MEDIA GROUP**

About Gamecock

Gamecock is the new publisher headed by former GoD CEO Mike Wilson and President Harry Miller founded for the explicit purpose of bringing fresh original games back to the industry (see last month's "Ink" section) while using the word cock in interesting new ways. All of the studios represented here are operating under the Gamecock label; Firefly, Edge of Reality, Crackpot and Red Fly. I've never embraced anything with the word cock in it but there's a first time for everything.

Point of View

Five unique new studios; we ask, they answer...

There's nothing wrong with mega budget me-too games that cater to a specific segment of die-hard gamers, but, in my opinion there is a great need in today's game industry for new IP, sequels, and (on occasion) licensed games that can be developed inside 18 months with an emphasis on fun and replayability over 20-plus hours of gameplay. Is this a part of your mindset?

Simon Bradbury, Lead Designer Firefly Studios: Oh yes! We want a game that is fun, both to play and to make, else why bother? Hero fits your bill nicely, thank you! It's a new IP, it covers interesting territory and the gameplay has an almost retro arcade feel to it. Hardcore nowadays is starting to mean

“Think about when games can approach Pixar-level-quality graphics (soon), and think about what a 40-hour game will cost to make...”

~Mike Levine, Founder, Crackpot Ent.

ossified, seen it before, I want to see new stuff.

Binu Philip, President Edge of Reality: Absolutely, in fact most of the work we did before starting Cipher Complex, our own IP, was licensed projects – Over the Hedge, Shark Tale, Spiderman 64 and Tony Hawk Pro Skater on N64. There's nothing wrong with making licensed games that offer players quick, fun sessions that aren't going to make them sit on the couch for hours trying their brain with intense stories and

impossible tasks. Sometimes you just want to come home, sit down for an hour and have some fun!

Mike Levine, Founder Crackpot Entertainment: At Crackpot Entertainment our mission is simple – to create original IP for the “multiplatform” age of media. And since most of us come from or began in games, we have a strong focus on this medium as our primary delivery vehicle. We think just as much about story, world, and characters as we do about gameplay. Games can be so many things – but at Crackpot our focus is really narrative-based experiences. It's what we were weaned on while at LucasArts in the '90s when we worked on games such as Day Of The Tentacle, Sam & Max Hit The Road, Full Throttle, The Dig, Grim Fandango and the rest. With the exception of the 20-hour gameplay mandate, we agree with your statement above. We have no problem with giant, epic games with 20 or even 40 hours of gameplay. But this industry needs shorter games for many reasons. There should be games for people who have grown up with games and just don't have the time they used to play them. There needs to be games for people who want to finish a game in 2 weeks, or dare I say even a week. We watch a movie in 2 hours. We watch TV in 30 and 60 minute segments. The web is all about short form content. Why do games need always be these opera-like epic lengths? I think games are starting to realize there is a place for short form content. And if you think about where this industry is headed with next-gen budgets, etc. – then

you could make the argument, we *have* to make shorter games. A Pixar film costs between 50-80 million to make, and it's less than 2 hours. Think about when games can approach Pixar-level-quality graphics (soon), and think about what a 40-hour game will cost to make. Makes me sweat and it's not even my money!

Jeff Mills, Director of Production Red Fly Studio: We just want to make a fun, original game, one that isn't driven by a relationship with some movie or TV show. And thanks to our publisher Gamecock, we're making a game that isn't motivated by quarterly reports or designed by an overzealous marketing department. We're making a game that we believe will be fun, a game that we want to play ourselves.

Dan Borth, CEO Red Fly Studio: This is exactly what we were thinking of when starting Red Fly. We had been kicking around Mushroom Men as an original IP and continued to work on it on our own time over the next year. Gamecock Media came along and gave us the chance to do it.

David Siller, Creative Director Throwback Entertainment: Absolutely! It's no secret that consumers in all categories of entertainment want new and original products to wow their interest. It is human nature to get excited about new things and new IPs present opportunities to bring forth the next-big-thing. Otherwise, it is indeed the same old thing over and over again with a sense of been there done that. Throwback Entertainment is founded on a very strong philosophy about creating very compelling, new and original properties that will be

Crackpot's Insecticide:

They can bug us all they want.



new studios for a better tomorrow



Edge of Reality's Cipher Complex

Going behind enemy lines
on the PS3 and Xbox 360.

developed as next-gen game titles and online comic books.

For instance: Nobody has capitalized on the many tens of thousands of gamers who would sell their soul for next-gen 2D. Games that would be comparably inexpensive to make and would set a new standard for detailed hand-drawn visuals...Taking it a step further; why not a game that shifts, where you could seamlessly go from 2D to 3D? Like a 2.5D side-scroll through a deep jungle and then turn into a ruin for a 3D stint (ala old Crash Bandicoot)... Why haven't we seen such an obvious transition? It seems like the industry's visionaries are all being stifled by corporate. Are small lean and mean studios the answer? What will you specifically bring to the table? Are you going to simply dredge up budget

versions of the usual suspects (FPS) or try to fill our time between blockbusters with some fresh new games?

Simon: 2D is easier and cheaper to produce and this will always help smaller studios (especially ones with thin, cost-conscious staff) bring interesting ideas to fruition, the kind of games that support the souls of developers two years into a big project, the kinds of games that remind them why they are doing this in the first place. The challenge is to make it pay, but the opportunities now, compared to 10 years ago say, are growing rapidly for the new developer.

We will certainly not be working on a budget, 'look alike'. Hero, our first title for Gamecock will stand squarely on its own two feet. It's a game that you can play between an epic such as Oblivion or a 'must play to see what all the fuss is about'. If we do our job right, Hero will be a game that people will want to come back to.

Separately, I have to say that we too are part of the 2D fan club and as a studio have plans afoot to return to it in a meaningful manner ...

Binu: I think with the advent of next-gen we haven't given developers enough time yet to really get their heads wrapped around the options open to them. Young developers are out there and dying to get their ideas made into games, and I can guarantee you there's someone, somewhere fleshing out a 2-D XBLA game, and that's the beauty of where the industry is heading now. I don't

think it's any secret that big publishers want blockbuster hits if they can get their hands on them, and it's something they all seem to be focusing on right now. As an independent developer, we're seeing much more innovation coming out of the indies than in-house development right now. Our goal with Cipher Complex is to take the action/stealth genre places it hasn't dreamed of going. We've done licensed/ported titles and we think it's about time we started breaking out with some original concepts and gameplay to spice things up!

That's not to say we won't be working on licensed things, if the right opportunity pops up we would jump on it. We just like having the option of going either way. We have all the tools necessary to create just about any game, and I can speak from first-hand experience when I say that when you are creating your own original game you become extremely passionate about it.

Mike: Music to my ears! Not to toot our own horn, but Crackpot Entertainment is all about bringing new ideas and genre "formulas" to the table, but our roots are firmly planted back in the old 2D style days. We are really a content creation company, that happens to have expertise in game making, but we are really IP driven. We listen to the IP and make a game that is suited for it. For our first title, Insecticide, the IP is very much a like a gritty, detective action movie – like Dirty Harry or The French Connection. Those types of stories call for both intense action, as well

"...I would predict that there will be a demand for PS2 product for several years or more to come"

~David Siller, VP of Development, Throwback Ent.

“we’re making a game that isn’t motivated by quarterly reports or designed by an overzealous marketing department”

—Jeff Mills, Director of Production, Red Fly

as slower paced, methodical moments – investigating crime scenes, talking to suspects, etc. Well you can’t really do the latter running on “11” with guns blazing. Any entertainment experience that does this, whether it’s film, TV, music or games, really diminishes the overall value. Games need better pacing to make the highs higher. And as for look, I think when you see the style we are going for you will be very excited. I think there can be a nice blend of that 2D/3D transition you are referring to.

Jeff: We’re creating a fun and clever title that tells an interesting story and gives players a unique perspective from which they’ve never gamed before. Our goal is not to invent a new genre. There will be some innovation due to the target console and the context of our game, but for the most part, Mushroom Men will be easy for everyone to pick up and play because the gameplay derives from the most fun elements of our favorite games.

Dan: Hopefully Mushroom Men will fill that void of fresh new games. We totally wanted to bring something new to the table with some aspects of gameplay the team enjoys. I think most publishers like the idea of franchise hits because of the installed user base. But at some point, new meat needs to be introduced to stifle the repetitiveness. Any studio can do this; it just takes the right publisher to take that chance on something they feel comfortable with.

Dave: It’s not worth the risk capital to serve up warmed over versions of yesterday’s news, where the fun in that? Throwback Entertainment will endeavor to bring forth as much creative innovation as possible to infuse into new video games that will hit the market in a timely fashion. We have great visions of what we intend to deliver in an efficient manner, meaning we aren’t going to keep our potential customers waiting a long time for a lot of promises, we want you and everyone else to taste the quality of our products as soon as possible. Mean and lean is a good thing so that no one gets lost in the process!

Regarding your 2.5D scenario, Naughty Dog did accomplish that in either the second or third Crash Bandicoot game on the PS1. With that said, there are always opportunities to implement ideas that have been done before again with a greater sense of production value.

We intend to deliver blockbuster games

with fresh ideas! The scope of every game is of course different, but we will not be making warmed-over crap of any type. We want to bring a fresh sense of innovation to everything we build.

How much mileage do you feel the PS2 has left? Think it will remain a vital format beyond 2007? Is Xbox toast? Why not make a wicked side-scroller for all those millions of consoles out there and sell it for \$19.99. What’s stopping people from tapping such an obvious market...Think Microsoft wants it dead?

Simon: With every evolution in console gaming, we see a usurpation of the previous systems, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re dead. When the PS2 came out the original PlayStation stepped down and was reinvented into the PSOne. The smaller/cuter packaging appealed to the younger brothers and sisters out there, making it the perfect starter console. I see the PS2 and original Xbox in the same position now, millions of units are being handed down and a younger generation is getting their hands on them for the first time. They’re far from “dead” platforms, but you should understand who your new audience is going to be. On the other hand, you still have gamers who don’t have 500-600 bucks to throw down on a new system and they feel the PS2/Xbox still has something to offer for the time being. God of War II is their shining example. Short answer- is it dead? No, will you have to be selective with what you release – absolutely. If great budget titles keep pumping out on the PS2/Xbox, there’s no doubt they’ll be around for a while.

As of right now, the new consoles (360/PS3/Wii) are giving developers like us the opportunity to go above and beyond anything we’ve seen before and as such we want to take advantage of that opportunity to create new and exciting games that will pave the way for even greater things in the future. I don’t think it’s an issue of Microsoft or Sony wanting to kill off the previous generation, but an issue of creative license being offered to developers. When you’re on the creative end of things, you always want to be on the cutting edge and doing things no one else is thinking of. That’s the biggest draw of the next-gen consoles, the capabilities and options open to us. We’d rather take that road less traveled in the hopes that we find something great at the end.

Binu: The PS2 is still very much alive; as long as they produce games for it I think it’ll stay afloat. Not everyone has the money to upgrade to the next-gen right off the bat, so there’s still a huge audience waiting for great games. I think this is a perfect opportunity for some fresh developers to get out there and get their feet wet. I think the excitement and promise of these new consoles and their abilities is what’s attracting many developers, but at the same time that’s how things progress. I’m looking forward to seeing what new projects people get going for the PS2, if you need an example just look at God of War II. They’re bringing a blockbuster that could easily be on the PS3, but they decided to keep it on PS2 for the fans. I think it’s a great

mushroom men

Red Fly’s Mushroom Men:

looks like they’ve been sampling the goods...



new studios for a better tomorrow



“Maybe they’ll start a revolution in the industry where small studios make the games they believe in instead of the games mathematically predicted to bring X number of sales in Q4 2007”

Jeff Mills, Director of Production, Red Fly

call on their part.

Mike: There is definitely an uphill battle we will have to face as we are making a new IP. We have seen with our industry that there are definitely long legs on current-gen systems, they just need the right games. There will be games coming for these millions of consoles, hopefully people will just pay attention to them. In our case, we think we will have some success with the guerilla marketing, you will see plenty of it from our publisher Gamecock. These guys know how to get great PR and we knew that when we signed up.

Jeff: Easy there, Mulder. There’s no conspiracy. Microsoft has a much more vital platform on which to put the games you’re talking about. We’re very excited about the potential of Xbox Live Arcade to deliver smaller games like you’re describing. In the early days of this industry, Lord British dropped floppy disks into Ziploc bags and sold them at local computer shops. Microsoft has given the industry a tool that will allow that same sort of “here, look at my game” opportunity for young, small studios. We hope Xbox Live Arcade lives up to that potential.

As for the old hardware, we know there’s still a massive user base. That’s one of the reasons we’re using Terminal Reality’s Infernal Engine. With the flip of a switch we can build a version of the game to run on any platform. Xbox, PS2, Wii, Xbox 360, PS3, or PSP. Some concessions must be made to fit on some of the lower-end hardware, of course, but that’s most handled by the engine’s editor. Any game made in the Infernal Engine can be re-fitted to fit on virtually any console with minimal effort. We’re fully aware of the potential to tap those existing, well-established user bases.

Dan: I agree with Jeff. I think the PS2 and Xbox still have a ton of life left in them. It would not be a smart move to cut off that user base. We’re using the Infernal Engine for many reasons. The ability to build a version of our game on additional platforms without a huge cost to us is a very attractive reason.

Dave: Personally, through many years of experience and always keenly watching the marketplace and also being a fanatic customer myself, I would predict that there will be a demand for PS2 product for several years or more to come. 115+ million units sold into the global marketplace do not go away overnight. I have seen first-hand over and over again where publishers are quick to

abandon the current-gen hardware in favor of supporting the next-gen. What is realized however is that the demand increases for current-gen product as game players still appreciate the capabilities of that console hardware that they own. In fact, I believe that in Japan, Sony is selling almost as many PS2s as they are PS3s. Also in Japan, there are still new releases of PS1 games. Xbox games can live on through the backward compatibility with the 360. Otherwise, that hardware is burnt toast! It seems to me that MS could not wait to move on and into the next-gen with the more appropriate weapon, the 360.

On the Xbox side-scroller question, we just might in fact be thinking that very same thing! You ask what’s stopping others from doing something so very logical and all I can offer to that is most of the mainstream publishers all follow each other without a lot of deviation. They hate to take so-called “risks” what you and I might call a “sure-thing”. Don’t you wonder sometimes just “who” it is at these companies that decide what games are made? I can tell you from experience that it’s most likely someone in management that doesn’t even play games or have a vision of what game players might want! Too often their “crystal ball” is fed by comments or feedback from the distribution channels or from an idea in the marketing department. Throwback Entertainment was founded by one of the biggest game fanatics that I have ever met, since meeting you. The whole spirit of creating this company was to present a whole portfolio of new titles loaded with innovative thinking. Throwback believes that our new and original video games will deliver that pick up and play intuitive nature existing in a totally enthralling fantasy world! A euphoric situation where players will lose themselves in the immersive dilemma we have created.

Handheld seems to be the true last bastion for fun, innovative games. Every time something different (Okami, Psychonauts, Beyond Good & Evil, Xyanide...) comes out on console they tank (proportionally with budgets) due to retailers not wanting them. It's not the games; it's that Joe Wal-Mart only wants big brands and sure things. Is it the same for the handheld market? If so how can new studios get around the retail quagmire? Mom and Pops are DOA... Seems like it's time for some guerilla marketing.

Simon: Everyone loves handhelds and rightly so, but if I were a new studio I would be looking at the PC right now. It is and has for a long time suffered from an image problem but I would say that it is at the bottom of that curve and now was a good time to look at it, not from the view point of a big budget AAA, but more from small interesting apps that can utilize its strengths of connectivity and cutting edge hardware. It is also the platform that offers the most interesting new delivery methods.

Binu: I think you’re absolutely right on this; the big retailers are a tough sell when it comes to new games on consoles. It takes

a lot to get them to notice a game, and even more to convince them that it’ll make them money. They’re in the business of selling mass quantities to give their customers the best price. I think they try to take this “wholesale” attitude and apply it to gaming, which really doesn’t work; in fact they end up cutting off their nose and hurting the industry. It’s sort of a vicious cycle that keeps original IPs down. It’s unfortunate that so many games and gamers end up paying for it in the end when a big retailer decides it’s “not worth it.” Handheld games are notoriously less expensive to produce as well as market; therefore it offers less for the retailer to be cautious of. If they’re looking at a \$60 game on 360 versus a \$20 or \$30 DS game, they’re thinking “it’s half the risk” and that’s the bottom line. The only way we’re going to be able to change this is by getting these original IPs out there and in the public eye so that demand is high and these retailers start to realize – maybe that thirtieth sequel isn’t such a “sure thing” after all.

Jeff: Hence the ‘Cock. We’re excited to be working with Gamecock. A lot of us worked with them back in the GOD days. Dan, Kris and I all worked on Nocturne at Terminal Reality, built on the Infernal Engine and published by Mike and Harry and their squad, so it’s a reunion of sorts for us to be working together again.

If anyone is going to get the market’s interest and show them how much fun original titles can be, it’s Gamecock. They’re quite the spectacle. They get people’s attention. And we know that once they look at our title and our sibling titles under Gamecock, they’ll be excited again, the way we were excited fifteen years ago in the shining early days of this industry.

Dan: There will always be some need for retail distribution. With Gamecock, we know they will be exploring all avenues from retail to digital.

Dave: Handhelds more often than not require a simpler kind of gameplay presentation that caters to games that are more intuitive and casual in the first place. You mention a few titles that under-performed but I’m not sure that you can lay all the blame on the retail channel or even the lack of marketing. Sometimes a game seems to have it all but really doesn’t and the paying customer knows this and simply doesn’t buy! Whether by word of mouth or rental or whatever reason, if *Psychonauts* was really that good, everyone would have bought it. Same with *Okami*, it might really look good on paper, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t deliver where and when it counts. People have heard of all of these games, they simply didn’t venture to spend their hard-to-come-by money for them! Every game gets its chance and it must deliver on more than promise, more than flash, more than smoke and mirrors, it has to be fun and easily playable to get deeply into it enough to be committed to finishing it.

As a publisher what’s your take on brands that got the shaft. Voodoo Vince, Tork, Evil Twin, Scrapland... games that were limited, dropped, or just for some reason

didn't meet expectations (due to dropping with a mega-hit, limited distribution etc.). Can you buy them out of exile and create sequels, or maybe tweak a little here and there or add a level and re-release them at 19.99... Wouldn't this be cheap and lucrative?

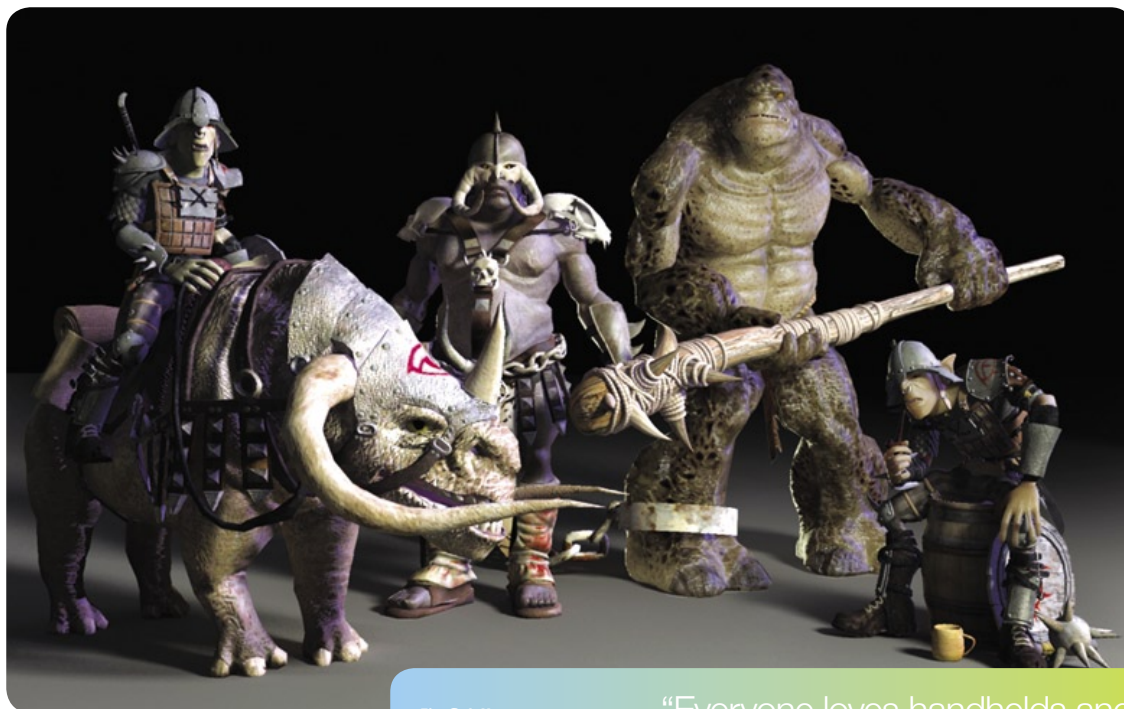
Dave: Throwback, in addition to planning the development of many exciting new titles is of course looking at a wide variety of possible products to bring onto the marketplace that make sense putting into gamers' hands. There are still great possibilities for "compilations" of classics titles from the past as well as other revenue-generating ideas, and we have some great surprises to come. Whether it is cost-effective to buy out these titles and bring them back from the dead depends on many factors. Those include who actually owns them, is the source code available and who owns that, can we enhance or further tweak and fine-tune these titles and what are the technology requirements to do that and were just getting started! Personally, I liked a couple of the games you mentioned, but their particular histories were determined by the strategic planning issues of the hardware manufacturer and what their target demographics were determined to be. Simply put, those games were developed on the wrong console!

(They should have all been Nintendo games!) Let's say I'm a guy with a few games in my head that would kill (I of course have my share) and could be made for under two million. How do I get my idea to a shop like yours? Or is that even done anymore? I remember when a great idea—like Toe Jam & Earl could be presented and if it was good, made. What happened to that spirit of invention? Are you driven by charts and graphs or out to break new ground?

Simon: I love pie chart software, but still haven't found an exciting way to put one in a game! We are certainly out to do something fresh, but also intend to be in business after it should the worst case happen. The best of games can and do fail and a developer needs the same attitude here as publishers, eventually you will be successful, you just need to be able stick around long enough for that to happen!

Binu: We're focusing inside right now, our IP was internal from the start, but I know exactly what you're talking about. Back in the day it was all about getting a great idea, convincing someone it's worth putting a budget behind and cranking out some awesome games. As you obviously know, and I've said before, it seems like things are more about the bottom line and what the next "blockbuster" is. We're not looking to dominate the market or turn the industry upside down, but we do want to make a game that gives gamers a reason to think there's still some originality left and more importantly - actual gamers making games.

Mike: The games and worlds we create are things that we love and inspire us. As soon as you let charts or graphs decide, you are in



big trouble.

Jeff: That's what Gamecock is all about! We were lucky to get in on the ground floor. They sought out unique game ideas and found us. Maybe they'll start a revolution in the industry where small studios make the games they believe in instead of the games mathematically predicted to bring X number of sales in Q4 2007. I'm skeptical. There's too much money to be made making Madden football games every year. I think situations like ours will remain rare for a long time. Maybe Xbox Live Arcade will help level the playing field, letting people put games into the marketplace without requiring a publisher to take a huge cut of the profits to cover marketing and distribution. Maybe Nintendo will open channels on the Wii to support such content.

Dave: Charts! Graphs! Surely you jest! Throwback Entertainment is somewhat old-fashioned in that we believe in our own creative visions for what we will do and for what we will make. Vision is the mother of invention, because all great ideas start with someone having a vision in their head for what could be. Then it is a lot of organizing and hard work to make that happen. We will not focus test our ideas into homogenized oblivion! Great new games are the result of a visionary or creator bravely pushing forward to make a game that they truly believe is innovative for the player to experience. We will strive to deliver that lost-in-it-all immersive and surrealistic escapism that great games inspire to be. As far as enabling others with a creative vision and passion required to deliver on their own dreams, we have some incredible plans

Firefly's Hero:

See; now these hero's I can get behind. No tights in site!

"Everyone loves handhelds and rightly so, but if I were a new studio I would be looking at the PC right now..."

—Simon Bradley, Lead Designer, Firefly

to be announced in the immediate future. Let's just say that we hear what you are saying loud and clear.

Those are some of my ideas to do to perk up the industry, what's your credo? Am I insane? What's the master plan?

Simon: I think you are clinically insane, maybe dangerously so, therefore as a safeguard I am not going to reveal the master plan to you.

Binu: I suddenly feel like I've been thrust into a James Bond movie...you'll never get anything from me Goldfinger!

Mike: You are definitely not insane! We agree with almost all you are saying! It's equally important to educate the consumer too, as their sales, more than anything, will drive great, new, original products to be made. What you have made at Play has its own, distinct style, and I am sure reaches people who are equally passionate as you. We need to get them to buy the innovative games, so more can be made!

Jeff: I'm glad Mike and Harry at Gamecock aren't the only people thinking like this. It seems obvious from within the industry that we're stagnating and losing our focus. Back when Roberta Williams made King's Quest, she did it because she wanted to make that game, not because Sierra needed a title to pad their projections for Spring

1984. Those were the games that brought us into this industry, games whose hearts you could feel because they were made with passion instead of market research and cost analyses.

Red Fly Studios is in a position today to bring back that sort of passion to the game landscape. Maybe gamers don't care about that sort of thing anymore. Maybe they care more about how many processors their console has or how many polygons are rendering every frame. But I doubt that. If kids today are anything like we were twenty years ago, they will enjoy a good game when they play it, no matter what marketing says.

Dan: Our master plan is to do what we are doing. Make original content as much as possible. Work hard, stop talking about it and do it. We're lucky we found a publisher that has given us the bat. Now it's up to us to take three swings with it.

Dave: Are you insane? I would say insane like a fox! You prove your heart everyday with what you write about and there is no doubt about your motives...seeing that great games are yet to come for all of us to play! What is our credo?

The master plan is simple: endeavor to wildly create, design and formulate great production plans, experiment as needed, innovate in design objectives, produce brilliantly, tweak, fine-tune, test, deliver and enjoy! **play**

Death Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom

Living dead boy

words Dave Halverson

the NDS has its very own brand of outmoded 3D. Let's call it "messy 3D". There's good messy 3D, and bad messy 3D. DJ: Science Fair of Doom is good messy 3D.

We touched on the crux of the game (wherein Smith and Weston's mutated rabbit turns the high school into a hellish maze and kills Pandora) back in our July '06 issue when the DS version was but a spatter under Backbone's microscope; although we didn't quite know what to expect in terms of tangible gameplay. The initial plan was to make the game completely stylus-driven, leading us to believe that Science Fair may be a somewhat alternative experience, however, it has since (wisely) been transformed into a full-fledged DJ platformer overflowing with play mechanics, trademark weaponry, and the DJ freak flag flying at full mast; and I'm not just talking about Seep and Stigmarcha. Flatulent giant hamsters, fire-farting cooked turkeys and other such curiosities are the fodder for DJ's scythe



and special arms as you scour the high school halls in search of Pandora's frozen remains. Pandora works as a spirit guide, revealing invisible platforms and using collected spirits to unlock DJ's way, so DJ must kill the resident mutants and then conjure Pandora (switch to spirit mode) to collect and fire spirit balls a la Yoshi eggs. Firing red or blue spirit balls at DJ heals him, while other colors are used to hit color-coded targets that warp DJ to places only Pandora can reach. Meanwhile, DJ acquires moves of his own along the way, such as scythe combos, a helicopter hover and a double-jump in concert with the game's ever-perilous platforming elements, and trust me, they run the gamut. This may not be the best looking DJ game to date, but if you're looking for a mini-platforming epic...look no further. Massive vertical platforming puzzles make up much of the gamescape, and usually require some measure of activation. Hook swinging, bouncing, vertical and horizontal floating platforms and pattern-based enemies make Science Fair a



platformer's delight complete with bosses that embody the horror camp that makes DJ one of the coolest franchises going. DJ can also get ahead by searching out students entombed within the bio-mess, gaining locker codes that lead to bonus content, more health, gun upgrades, new weapons and more confidence: The higher DJ's confidence, the more damaging his combos.

Guns, rifles, C4 hamsters and the like still play a role (although I found most ineffective when compared to the scythe), but not nearly as much as in past outings, making this a fittingly fresh sequel...I'd love to see the same game done Paper Mario-style but I'm more than happy with the results given the game's wobbly beginnings. If you've been paying attention, you'll also notice that the game has been given a complete graphics overhaul over these past months, as concept became reality. Backbone ended up going with a combination of stylus and button commands in conjunction with variations on both, allowing you to shoot and attack using either method with movement tethered to the D-pad. The end result is a game that everyone will find comfort in controlling; stylus purists or haters alike. Browsing the incidentals the

music is a perky monster mash, although the still-frame-rendered cinematics leave much to be desired. I'd have preferred a Matsuda-charged layered diorama but what's here gets the job done in its own peculiar style. Honestly I could care less, given that the DJ series has spawned yet another fine (if not somewhat quirky) game. It's time to make the leap to Wii or 360...just in time for the anime and manga. Go Death!

Death Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom

Score **8.0**

+ A complex platformer wrapped in horror camp and an array of play mechanics—great music, incredibly fun and at times innovative.

- Tricky navigation, DS poly power not so great.

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Backbone Vancouver
Publisher	Konami
Online/Multi	WiFi mini-games
Available	March
ESRB Rating	RP



TO DIE IN BATTLE IS TO LIVE FOREVER



AVAILABLE NOW



300: MARCH TO GLORY © 2007 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. Developed by Collision Studios. COLLISION STUDIOS is a trademark of Collision Studios LLC. "PlayStation", "PS" Family logo, and "PSP" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Memory Stick Duo™ may be required (sold separately). The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks and copyrights are the property of their respective owners. All rights reserved.



WB GAMES LOGO, WB SHIELD: ™ & © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.
(s07)

300 March to Glory

If it bleeds or not, you can kill it

words Dave Halverson

handheld games are often taken for granted due to their diminutive screen size, when the truth is that they are often the Petri-dish for innovation and fresh gameplay. Where console gaming has failed to progress the traditional hack 'n slash we find the aptly named Collision Studios taking up the slack, crafting a diverse new actioner with an emphasis on change. 300 (and what better fodder for such a massacre) is a game that never stands still. Somewhat reminiscent of Sega's tragically overlooked *Spartan: Total Warrior*, 300 is similarly diverse but much faster paced and brutal.

Best described as a thinking man's action game, that didn't stop the developers from letting the blood flow. It's always nice to see a company stay true to a property, rather than dumb it down to let kids in on the fun. 300 is an adult film and as such it is an adult game. Limbs are severed and heads lopped off on your crusade against the Persians, as you lead Leonidas's Spartans to their ultimate glory. If *Fist of the Northstar* and *Berserk* had a baby (with a high IQ) it would look like 300.

But the game doesn't rely on bloodletting alone; far from it. Proper mastery of your sword and spear is crucial as is fortifying your weapons and armor. The fighting itself is a picture of technique: Only a spear can crack a shield, and blades possess increasingly more powerful combo attacks as you fill your wrath gauge to unleash the game's key maneuvers. Immortals and other such mythological warriors can only be defeated by special

"Best described as a thinking man's action game, that didn't stop the developers from letting the blood flow."



forces, giving the game great technique. You must build up wrath while properly using your shield to spare health so that you may unleash the required move, such as "Blood Drunk" rather than use it to heal. The game requires patience and savvy but in the best possible way. It never drags. New play mechanics are introduced and put to use swiftly throughout—no laborious training or puzzles required. Puzzles be damned, by the way. I'll take a shorter more compelling game over artificial length any day. Phalanx is another new device, in which a battle line is formed to push against concentrated hordes deftly using spears to crack shields and skewer on-comers before they drive you back.

The game is just as interesting and arresting visually as it is to play. I love the way certain developers use the PSP hardware to create completely unique looks. In 300 the characters are simple in geometry but the capes are beautifully animated, as are the attacks. There are no visible seams (save for the occasional close-up encounter) and the backgrounds are filled with spectacular touches such as layered clouds, crashing waves and nicely simulated seas. The story—shown through gorgeous layers of graphic novel diorama—is also wonderfully told, and the voice acting in-game throughout is of rare caliber. Speaking of rare caliber, you've not heard a gothic overture so powerful as this soundtrack on your PSP to date, so break out the headphones.

Yet another exceptional PSP original; there's nothing like 300 available on



300's battles are bloody good!



console. Perhaps with time games such as this will find their way back to the big screen, but in the meantime I'm quite content to have them in the palm of my hand.



300: March to Glory

score **8.5**

- + Excellent pacing, play mechanics, visuals, music, and balance.
- As always I like characters that jump. These don't.

System(s)	PSP (exclusive)
Developer	Collision Studios
Publisher	Warner Bros. Games
Online/Multi	NA
Available	March
ESRB Rating	M

Chocobo Tales

I tawt I saw a giant chicken!

words Heather Campbell

O kay, I know it's pretty old news by now, but it still delights me to no end to see Final Fantasy/Square-Enix titles on Nintendo Hardware. I can't get over it, even though you probably already have. It's like seeing your parents get back together following a fight, and then watching them remain happily married for years after. This metaphor holds especially true when you were raised by video-games.

So, here's an original Square-Enix title for Nintendo, another cute valentine from one old lover to another. Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales is a collection of mini-games, micro-games, and RPG elements for the DS, featuring cameos

from almost every Final Fantasy game in existence. Though the game appears as a mini-game sampler (and on the DS, it wouldn't surprise anyone), there's actually a story here; it's about a white mage named Shirma, a black mage named Croma, and Chocobo.

I know. It's like naming your cat, "Cat."

When a magical book created by Darkmaster Bebuzuu is opened and all of Chocobo's friends are sucked into its pages, it's up to the little yellow bird to free Tonberry and Shiva alike from the plotlines of familiar fairytales. As silly as it is, seeing Adamantioise in *The Tortoise and the Hare* brought an embarrassing, fan-girl smile to my face.

The game isn't just made for Final Fantasy groupies, however. The microgames and mini-challenges stand on their own as addictive casual pieces. Final Fantasy fans will get more out of the game simply by being familiar with the characters, but even new players can smash through the game with delight.

Completing minigames unlocks cards, which are then used in a card-based Pop-Up Duel -- which plays like fast-reflex Pokemon. Assembling your fifteen-card deck from a huge number of cards, you



Square Enix does chicken right!



“What makes the game stand out is the gorgeous character design from Crystal Chronicles’ Toshiyuki Itahana...”

take on an opponent in a luck-and-skill based strategy game. This is where Wi-Fi and friends comes in handy; playing the game against the computer isn't nearly as fun or challenging as a real-world adversary. What's more, by using the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection, players can fight Chocobos from all over the world.

What makes the game stand out is the gorgeous character design from Crystal Chronicles' Toshiyuki Itahana, and the charming production from young Yuuki Yokoyama. The DS can pump out some sweet 3D, and Chocobo Tales pressures the hardware into some really gorgeous vistas. It should be just another mini-game collection, but the presentation and concept of Chocobo Tales makes it feel like something richer.

Chocobo Tales

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	Versus Wi-Fi
Available	April 3, 2007



Come fly the not-so-friendly skies

words Brady Fletcher

after Burner was around some 20 years ago; go back and play it now and you might realize how forgiving life was back then. It's been a long time since the series has been revisited, but now we're getting a new look with After Burner: Black Falcon. While a good deal of the game is what you'd expect from a modern title, After Burner: Black Falcon isn't scrapping all the classic simplicities. The game is focused on speed of play and racking up a ton of quick kills for big points, presenting the action with fairly limited maneuverability through the 3D space. You can boost and break, do a loop the loop and bank and dive through openings in the terrain, but you're basically being lead linearly through all the action with the focus on locking in on groups of enemy patterns for combo kills.

Scores of planes fly in and out of the screen in quick procession, rewarding you with a continual string of power-ups if you're able to knock them out fast enough. Part of the strategy is nabbing the payload and health rewards before they zip out of range, and occasionally a slowmotion powerup will be rewarded, offering you the chance to hone in on more planes and grab even more points.

Your earnings can be spent on buying and upgrading 15 aircraft. They all offer their own basic strengths

and weaknesses, but you'll probably end up finding your favorite early on and outfitting it for the long haul.

Three characters track the same story of a band of mercenaries stealing a stash of state-of-the-art planes, offering you the choice to play each one through their unique perspective. This is an arcade game, pure and simple, so don't expect too much from the story or extra trimmings.

Online multiplayer joins the four-player ad hoc battles to give you life outside of the satisfying single-player. Developed by Planet Moon, After Burner: Black Falcon stays away from the company's usual touches of quirky humor seen in games like Armed and Dangerous and Giants, but when you take to the skies to battle a friend whose plane has cow udders, you know someone over there was having their proper fun. **play**

After Burner: Black Falcon

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Planet Moon
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	1-4 play ad hoc
Available	March



"The game is focused on speed of play and racking up a ton of quick kills for big points."



Wario

Master of Disguise

The purple plunderer returns!

words Dave Halverson

I love Wario; have since he first entered the picture as the anti-Mario. Even though he's a lead weight he's my man in Mario

Kart; Treasure's Wario World is among my favorite GameCube games of all time and Wario Land on Virtual Boy I consider one of gaming's greatest treasures. That said, I loathe WarioWare: Each archaic edition is like a poke in my eye. So it is with much glee that I welcome the true Wario back into the fold in this ultimate pairing of traditional and stylus-driven action gaming.

The game begins as Wario nods off into TV land, landing of course in a show about a super thief, the Silver Zephyr, stealer of dazzling treasures. Wario's rotund behind comes barreling down directly onto the star's head thus jarring his most sacred instrument from his clutches: Goodstyle, the gem-eating, talking magic wand. Without it the Silver Zephyr becomes everyday ordinary Count Cannoli who

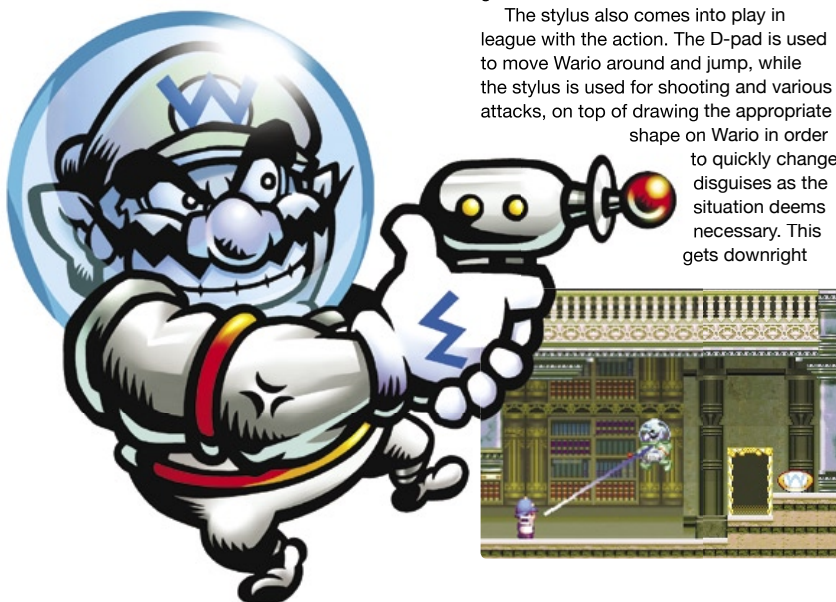
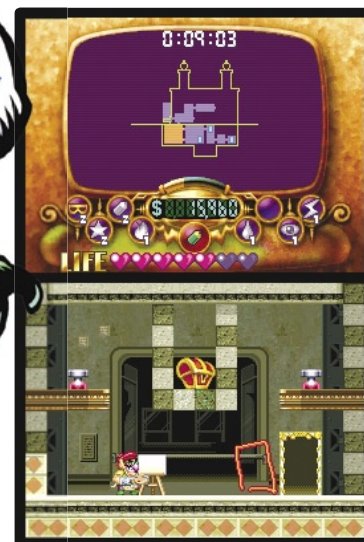
"...you've never seen such dastardly depictions of Nintendo's plumpest purveyor of plunder!"

assumes the role of pursuer as Wario makes off with the wand, which has the ability to eat the guise games Wario pilfers from treasure boxes and convert them into disguises that grant Wario special powers. The only hitch is that each treasure box houses a challenge that will surely appease all you WarioWare lovers; thus getting chocolate in the proverbial peanut butter, granting us both what we want. I get sweet Wario platforming action, complete with singular play mechanics for every disguise and you get loads of Wario-tastic mini-games.

The stylus also comes into play in league with the action. The D-pad is used to move Wario around and jump, while the stylus is used for shooting and various attacks, on top of drawing the appropriate shape on Wario in order to quickly change disguises as the situation deems necessary. This gets downright

insane as the game wears on and you become the master of all disguises, quickly scribbling the requisite shapes to thwart Cannoli's traps and gadgets while collecting each venue's booty. ...Dragon Wario, Wicked Wario, Sparky Wario... you've never seen such dastardly depictions of Nintendo's plumpest purveyor of plunder!

The 2D visuals in MoD are simply wonderful, buoyantly animated and wonderfully drawn; the music and voice



are pure Wario—such a fiend—and Suzak (F-Zero Climax) capture that trademark Nintendo feel perfectly. This is one (more) DS game not to be missed.

Wario Master of Disguise

score **9.0**

- + Wario's back in action!
- I keep having Bonanza Bros. flashbacks!

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Suzak
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now
ESRB Rating	E 10+

Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos

Preview

System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	Idea Factory	Available	April
Publisher	NIS America	ESRB Rating	E 10+



Even though it's still young in terms of years, the PSP has already amassed quite the library of strategy games, and soon, NIS America will be presenting yet another to tempt your wallet. As the sequel to the previous PSP SRPG *Generation of Chaos*, *Aedis Eclipse* looks to take the ideas and game play of the original, and refine and improve them for a better gaming experience.

If you're unfamiliar with the name *Generations of Chaos*, think less *Final Fantasy Tactics* and more *Dragon Force*. Delving into one of the game's three unique worlds, you'll command up to five generals at a time, each leading a maximum of thirty soldiers, all ready to be used (and abused) in order to take down your opponent. Combat unfolds in real time, with the armies from both sides fighting it out on their own until only

one stands; so, the real strategy here is in things such as your pre-engagement planning, careful decision making in which unit should be used when, and in controlling the current area as best you can. The game's maps provide for a lot of strategic elements that are important to keep in mind, and defending your bases or changing the elemental factor of spaces are just as key in achieving victory as the actual battles themselves.

Finally, NIS America isn't skimping when it comes to bringing the game to our shores, with English voice acting cropping up all over the place, and work being done to help reduce load times when compared to the original Japanese release. **Eric L. Patterson**



Touch the Dead

Preview

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	Wi-Fi multi-player
Developer	Dream On	Available	Summer
Publisher	Eidos	ESRB Rating	M

funny thing about *Touch the Dead* is that the title is also almost a complete description of the game. Picture a scaled down FPS version of *House of the Dead* where you're on a moving track slaughtering lumbering zombies by tapping on body parts—aiming for the head of course for a quick kill giving you time to drag the bullets on the right to your clip on the left for the next wave. It's a simple premise for sure that hasn't been done on DS for obvious reasons: its inherent lack

of 3D processing power. This is however every bit a mindless pick-up-and-play shooter which may appeal to many a DS gamer. In its current state the game needs balancing and a way to attack between reloading, but if they make it enjoyable and less tedious—there's not nearly enough ammo to delve very deep into the game—Eidos could have something here. Hopefully, as the game lurches on so will the diversity of zombies and monsters as well as the scenery. Do you have the touch? The power? **Dave Halverson**





Warhound

Money in your sights

Preview

words Mike Griffin



Mercy is for
the weak in
Warhound's
world.



"...options that branch out as you deal death for the highest government or private interest bidders."

good developers get restless when a genre they specialize in becomes over-saturated. They crave new angles. We're beginning to witness the fallout of this saturation in first-person shooters as efforts like S.T.A.L.K.E.R. add open world survival elements. Techland, keeper of the Chrome engine, has joined the liberation. Their forthcoming FPS is Warhound, chronicling the violent journey of a modern day war mercenary. This trek will include many non-linear elements, options that branch out as you deal death for the highest government or private interest bidders.

Techland referenced dozens of different atlases, wildlife albums, photos and films while designing the terrain, vegetation and architecture of Warhound's many conflict zones. The Chrome 4 engine used in Warhound is an evolution of Techland's Call of Juarez engine, now equipped for Shader Model 4.0 and optimized for Xbox 360. The detail level demonstrated thus far is impressive. Areas in the Balkans and pacific tropical islands have extremely lush foliage. Chrome 4's atmospheric effects breathe life into the African savannah and flank North Korea in appropriate suburban tension. These regions are a geographic guideline but the actual terrain of the battlefield will change from mission to mission.

Warhound employs a randomization system. In most cases you'll be given key targets and a couple of side tasks then the game will generate a mash-up of level elements in the region: different starting points, new locations for enemies, alternate placement of key events or NPCs. Completing missions in Warhound

earns you cash and raises your mercenary rank. The former is handy for shopping at freelance vendors; the latter will determine where your special services might be needed. There's always a war going on somewhere.

All this emergent havoc helps to fuel player advancement in one of three categories: Climbing, Vehicles and Weapons. You may be the kind of mercenary that drives a vehicle into the enemy camp guns blazing, or perhaps you'd prefer to climb a nearby ledge and snipe the bad guys from afar. All mission parameters will feature such opportunities, whether you're saving a kidnapped VIP or out to assassinate a dictator. Between missions you'll replenish supplies, arrange undercover transportation, buy and trade intelligence and track down the most rewarding contracts.

Techland is also developing a crazy-ambitious multiplayer mode for Warhound where up to 32 mercs will clash using tons of weapons, all their skills, and a fleet of off-road cars, armored vehicles, jeeps, tanks, quads, choppers and boats. As we go to press, Techland is still seeking the ideal North American publisher for Warhound. Perhaps Ubisoft will bite again...

Warhound

Developer	Techland
Publisher	TBA
Online/Multi	32-player DM, Teams
Available	Q3 2007

preview



FIELD OPS

Two genres for the price of one

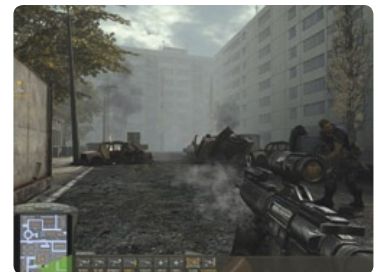
Preview

words Mike Griffin

When Freeze Interactive's Olivier Goulon first approached us regarding Field Ops, the concept of a "real-time strategy shooter" sounded like a difficult fusion, especially for a young Swiss publisher. It's a modern day special ops vs. terrorists storyline with 15+ hours of mission spread across regions of Afghanistan, Ukraine, Cuba and USA. Here's the hook: Field Ops can be played as a real-time strategy game or as a first person shooter and you can switch between gameplay modes absolutely anytime. A very interesting proposition, but incredulity remained. The

Freeze COO dropped a demo build into a UPS parcel and playable proof arrived from Geneva two days later. It was time to shift perspectives.

RTS veterans Digital Reality, happy to prove they're more than a strategy studio, will handle the nuts and bolts of development on Field Ops, but the design document and final testing runs through Freeze. Olivier comments on the decision to tackle a hybrid: "This is a basic idea we've seen in the past in Battlezone, for example, but it was never fully exploited. We will allow the player to switch on-the-fly from RTS game mechanics to a FPS game." Sure enough, toggling modes in



Field Ops causes the camera to zoom from the RTS overhead view right into a first-person perspective. The timing and angle of entry are well-measured and the interface morphs from RTS unit management to first-person shooter HUD and reticule in clever, gee-whiz fashion.

Like any recent RTS title, Field Ops will have hero units on both the spec ops and terrorist side. While each faction has seven classes (including the invariably-controversial Suicide Bomber unit), fittingly the good guys have more heroes. Each hero will have scaling skills and attributes. Stephen Murray, for example, is the rugged heavy gunner. He gets skill points every couple of levels and will focus on attributes like toughness, ammo upgrades and pain

level. Field Ops' special units translate into FPS heroes as well, so players can immerse themselves in each archetype's combat role from different gameplay perspectives at any time during the campaign.

Field Ops

Developer	Digital Reality
Publisher	Freeze Interactive
Online/Multi	2-6p conquer, escort, bomb run
Available	June

preview

"...the interface morphs from RTS unit management to first-person shooter HUD."



Age of Conan

Funcom the conqueror

Preview

words Mike Griffin

Age of Conan is the blood-spattered barbarian of the online genre; a mature ancient world adventure informed by Robert E. Howard's wild and depraved imagination. Much good has come to Funcom's vision of Hyboria recently and we're very optimistic about Conan's chances for success. Besides being confirmed for Xbox 360, the game has now been paired with a very strong

publisher in Eidos, while Microsoft has invested significant interest in Conan's impressive Direct X 10 client. Even the Norwegian Film Fund is contributing to Funcom's coffers these days.

The best news for Conan doesn't come from the boardroom or marketing department. The AoC team has been granted several months of extra development time thanks to the happy fiscals. The game will now arrive no sooner than October 30th.



Advanced shaders capture the barbarism.

Bonus time will be spent polishing the world, exploiting the 360's awesome GPU, and fine-tuning the Cimmerian, Aquilonian and Stygian player classes.

We love that Age of Conan will preface its online game with a full single-player campaign written by the Dreamfall team, however the after-party—one's MMO career—is where it's at. If you've always wanted to be that stoic shaman or ranger living off the land, draped in wolf hides, terrorizing packs of thick-skulled savages, this is it. Cool twists on RPG conventions abound, such as the "soul corruption" that caster classes like the Demonologist suffer after abusing certain powerful incantations. Spellweaving in particular, risks accumulating so much corruption as to damn the player to the underworld, where he must fight through dark hordes to reclaim his soul. This is one of many world lore-inflected scenarios

adapted to make sense in Age of Conan's unabashedly hardcore gameplay.

With solo, party and siege content, player-made villages and over thirty distinct world regions, not to mention its availability on both 360 and PC, Age of Conan is poised to begin a long reign this fall.

Age of Conan

preview

System(s)	PC, Xbox 360
Developer	Funcom
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	Persistent Online
Available	October

Call of Juarez

Darkness stirs in south Texas

Preview

words Mike Griffin

Ubisoft heard the Call of Juarez when they decided to sign Techland's wild west FPS for release in North America. After announcing the game would be postponed while a Vista client was prepared, they immediately asked for an Xbox 360 version to be built alongside. When CoJ arrives this summer, both the PC and console versions will include new content and expanded multiplayer not seen in the European version.

The setting is south Texas, 1882. 19-year old Billy Candle has been accused of murdering his mother and stepfather. The Reverend Ray McCall is a fanatical ex-gunslinger and brother of said murdered stepfather. Call of Juarez offers a complete campaign for both characters, following the hunter (Ray) and hunted (Billy). The darker mystery of who actually killed Billy's parents and the curse of the Juarez treasure permeates the story.

Ubisoft has commissioned several new multiplayer features and maps for the game. The 360 version will be the only wild west-

themed FPS on the system with deep Xbox Live support. Modes will include Death Match, Attack and Defend, and Retrieval. You can also hunt down desperados with a friend in co-op mode. Multiplayer in Call of Juarez will emphasize historical scenarios like Billy the Kid's famous shootout at Stinking Springs Ranch and train robberies on horseback, six-shooter in tow.

Techland's Chrome engine translates to 360 magnificently, running the game as if it were installed on a high-end PC, while Vista users can count on enhanced shaders and performance in their edition of the title. The US version of Call of Juarez stands to be a much better game than its European counterpart when it arrives in June.



Call of Juarez

preview

System(s)	PC, Xbox 360
Developer	Techland
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	Co-op/DM/Team
Available	Summer

Authentic wild west scenarios and one angry reverend.



Silverfall

Everything that glitters

Review

words Mike Griffin

the guiding premise in Silverfall is the struggle of nature versus technology. The Nelwë continent is split by this ideological gap and it forms the foundation of a great city's rebuilding. The game's quirky narrative is delivered by main characters with full VO and performances range from good to utterly forgettable. Diablo 2 is a fine reference for Silverfall's expansive skill tree system, represented here in melee, ranged and spellcaster flavors. Monte Cristo spices up their skills with ability paths that are only available when you have accrued a certain faction standing with either nature or technology.

Silverfall is diminished by its interface. Little niggles like not being able to drag items onto your portrait to equip them; bigger problems like no confirmation box after making skill selections and no auto-sort for inventory. This all compounds into larger quality of life issues for players, like no separate buyback window on

vendors and no option to auto-equip when looting your tombstone. Thankfully these missed opportunities don't interfere with pointing, clicking and releasing fury upon a sea of exotic, well-conceived monsters guarding thousands of items.

The pacing in Silverfall is agreeable, if a little flat at times no thanks to meandering level design. Experience and new gear come fast and furious and your quest path is always eminently visible on the mini-map. The game's cell-shaded look is a simple black outline effect that can be toggled on or off. When you turn it off, the game loses one of its more unique characteristics. Many of Silverfall's overland locations are textured in bland palettes that no amount of over-specular bump maps can disguise, however the visuals fair much better inside dungeons.

Despite its unique moral compass,

Strong creature design in a world of inconsistency.



gameplay-altering factions, solid multiplayer and competent combat, Silverfall isn't terribly convincing when



it commits a number of miscues. There are better titles on the shelf (and on this page) for fans of the form to be spending their money on.

Silverfall

score 6.0

+ Nice attempt to break away from conventional storytelling. Faction choices lead to different skills and items. Impressive creatures.

- Interface is half-baked and short on convenience. Bland textures and skyboxes disturb visual uniformity.

Developer	Monte Cristo
Publisher	Atari
Online/Multi	1-8p co-op/PvP
Available	March
ESRB Rating	Teen

Titan Quest Immortal Throne

A vacation in Hades

Review

words Mike Griffin

iron Lore is back with another ancient world slaughter. The Titan Quest: Immortal Throne expansion has more levels, more skill masteries and class combos, new monsters and locations, and hundreds of new pieces of loot, all at a reasonable expansion pack price of less than \$30 bucks. You can't go wrong with Immortal Throne if you enjoyed the first TQ. This installment does not skimp on production values or length and many of the game's core features have been improved.

Apparently not all the gods endorsed the mortals' cavorting across Mount Olympus in the first game. Certain unspoken rules were broken in the process. Now creatures have begun to spill forth from the upper gates of Hades to terrorize the poor plebs. The sorceress Medea can smell dark magic at work. You'll fight your way to the underworld in search of answers. Immortal Throne dives right back into the ancient Greek mythology, guided by superior voice acting

and lengthy apocryphal tales woven by village bards.

It's great to see auto-sorting options inside the basic inventory. All games with this much raw loot dropping should have inventory auto-sort buttons and intelligent backpack tabs, features that Immortal Throne has. Iron Lore also added caravans (a.k.a. banks) to further expand your inventory size, and they've inserted a very thoughtful second bank slot that allows you to transfer items between characters. They get the little things right.

Predictably, Immortal Throne recycles some assets from the first game, though most of Hades is all-new and quite sinister. Like its predecessor, Immortal Throne has great looking action with ultra-sharp spell effects that compliment the game's consistently solid visuals. Environments and characters are bright, colorful and richly detailed, and enemies generate a carnage-filled din of punchy sound effects as you chop through them.

Just the adventure would've been fine, but Immortal Throne adds ten more



character levels, more class combinations and new types of gear like enchanter artifacts. This is an expansion that reinvigorates the Titan Quest experience and re-affirms the first game's quality.



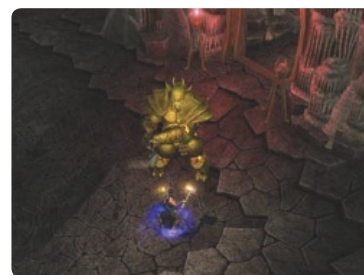
Titan Quest Immortal Throne

score 8.0

+ Nice production values; breathes new life into your game for a good price. Core features keep improving.

- A wicked challenge later in the adventure...but nobody said Hell was going to be easy.

Developer	Iron Lore
Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	Co-op campaign
Available	March
ESRB Rating	Teen





REDEFINING YOUR STANDARDS



AURORA™ 7500



AURORA™ m9700

Powered by the AMD Athlon 64 X2: cutting-edge technology for cutting edge users. Break the limits of performance.

WWW.ALIENWARE.COM/PLAY

1.800.ALIENWARE

Alienware can not be held responsible for errors in photography or typography. Actual case may vary in design. Availability may change without notice. Alienware, Alienware Alien head logo and Aurora are registered trademarks or trademarks of Alienware Corporation. AMD, the AMD Arrow logo, AMD X2, and combinations thereof, are trademarks of Advanced Micro Devices, Inc. © 2007 All rights reserved. All other registered trademarks and trademarks are the property of their respective owners.





ask alienware

no. 010: vista edition // april 2007

This month we say hola to all things Vista, as Microsoft's next-generation OS begins to take hold of America. We also address the functionality—and many acronyms—of system memory and high-def optical drives.

Q. If I upgrade to Windows Vista, can I be sure that all the games I ran in XP will continue to work in Vista? That's the only factor holding me back.
Dre, Chicago IL.



Alienware: This is a question that we have been asked often since the launch of Windows Vista. The more recent (and more popular) games will be fully compatible with Windows Vista. Older games may experience compatibility issues with Windows Vista. So if you are playing the most recent games, such as World of Warcraft or Battlefield 2142, you can continue to rock them out with Windows Vista. The cool thing about Windows Vista is that it allows you to enjoy both DirectX 9 games and the emerging generation of cutting-edge DirectX 10 games. Windows XP will not enable DirectX 10 games.

Q. Are there any stand-out hardware compatibility details a buyer should know when it comes to Windows Vista? Rick, Granby CO.

Alienware: Windows Vista takes full advantage of the hardware that is installed on your system. If you have high-end graphics, dual-core processors and 1GB of memory, your Vista experience will be the best it can be. To benefit from all of Windows Vista's features, you want to have the most updated processor and graphics card possible along with plenty of system memory and hard drive space.

Q. When you install a Blu-ray or HD-DVD drive in a new PC, what kind of security is there for viewing copy-protected content? I mean things like DRM, HDCP, etc. Is that stuff being enforced right now? And do you need to use a digital connection from PC to HDTV, or will a component adapter be OK? David, Bellevue WA.



Alienware: Yes, copy-protection is being enforced on two fronts, software and hardware. On the software side, Windows Vista regulates the distribution of copy-protected content. In regards to hardware, HDCP compliancy is dependant on the graphics card. For example, if you are outputting Blu-ray content through a non-HDCP graphics card, you will not be able to experience the max resolution for Blu-ray, 1080p.

Q. I have a 64-bit CPU but it's not the newest chip on the block. It still has some life left in it though. So here's the question: since Windows Vista is 64-bit, will my older 64-bit CPU immediately perform better after I upgrade? Also, I was wondering what makes Vista so much better at handling dual-core processors. Charles, Toronto ON.



Alienware: Vista enhances systems with a 64-bit processor by delivering increased memory capabilities and stronger security features like Data Execution Prevention and Microsoft's PatchGuard. As a result, the performance of applications with heavy memory demands is greatly improved and your data is better protected against security threats. Vista doesn't necessarily handle dual-core processors better,



but it does take full advantage of the multitasking capabilities provided by dual-core processors.

Q. I'm in the market for a new graphics card that runs all of Windows Vista's bells and whistles and I don't want to break my bank. I can't bring myself to invest in a new Direct X 9 card as Vista's DX 10 features look really cool. When are we going to start seeing mid-range Vista cards from all makers? Ted, Fairfax VA.



Alienware: As with most new graphics card launches, the high-end cards are available while the mid-range cards filter in afterwards. You should expect mid-range cards to become available later this year.

Q. I love PC gaming for its upgradeability and RAM is obviously a big deal. I've heard that Windows Vista is able to handle a lot

"...the interface morphs from RTS unit management to first-person shooter HUD.."

more RAM than XP. How much RAM can Vista use, and up to what point will a PC game actually take advantage of the extra memory? I bet WoW would be insanely smooth with like 10 gigs of RAM installed! Jason, Houston TX.

Alienware: Different Windows Vista versions provide different maximum RAM capabilities. The chart below demonstrates the differences. While Windows Vista 64-bit operating systems support up to 8GB, 16GB or 128GB of RAM, your system may not be able to. As more demanding software applications are created, you will begin to see adoption of higher RAM capabilities.

For more information about Alienware's products, please visit www.alienware.com/ask

Windows Vista Version	32- Bit Windows Vista Max Memory	64-Bit Windows Vista Max Memory
Home Basic	4GB	8GB
Home Premium	4GB	16GB
Ultimate	4GB	128GB



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bitrates and firewalls, send them along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free 1-year subscription, so don't be shy!



Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama



AOU Show 2007

words Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

"There were tons of games! Like, classic games in classic genres."

the arcade scene continues to cling to tenuous life in Japan. While perhaps now unthinkable in suburban America, "Game Centers" remain an ever-present and viable nearby entertainment destination in hyperurbanized Japan. The last decade has seen unstoppable trending towards music, prize, medal, and crane games, a greater emphasis on entertainments aimed at women, and the rise of internet play-enabled strategy and card games. Little remains of the classic, heady late 80s/early 90s vibe Americans probably most strongly associate with arcades, which is why this year's Amusement Operators' Union Show surprised me.

There were tons of games! Like, classic games in classic genres. Fighting! Shooting! Action! Racing! Capcom may have been absent this year, their promising-looking fighting game War of the Grail seemingly cancelled, but look; there is Sega, there is Namco, there is Konami,

there is Taito, all presenting gaming nuggets comparable with those beloved arcade experiences of yesteryear. Are they doomed to fail? Will the industry's flirting

with old-school nostalgia soon swing right back to non-gamer oriented mundanity? That's not for me to say, but at least we can enjoy it while we can.



bandai namco

The biggest news at AOU 2007 was, obviously, **Tekken 6**. We've known it would run on PlayStation 3 hardware for quite a while now, and a realtime demo was shown at last year's E3 that hinted at radical new gameplay changes. AOU offered our first look at the actual game itself, introducing two new characters in the form of an androgynous German master of Bajiquan (the same style as Virtua Fighter's Akira) named Leo, and sultry Arabesque beauty Zafina, who uses a slinky, fictional style that looks



set to bewilder and confuse just as much as Eddy Gordo did back in Tekken 3. Namco promises even more new characters yet to be revealed resulting in a roster larger than that of even Dark Resurrection, and a massively revamped customization system that will actually influence gameplay. A hint of this seems to be shown at the end of the AOU trailer, which has Bryan Fury juggling an opponent with a shotgun blast (!). Other Bandai Namco offerings included **Mario Kart Arcade Grand Prix 2**, sequel to 2005's popular Nintendo/Namco collaboration,





Wangan Midnight 3 Maximum Tuned, an incremental update to the Wangan Midnight series of mountain road racing games, and **New Space Order**, a fascinating realtime strategy game that builds on the hi-tech corporate mythos established in Ace Combat 3: Electrosphere.



What was hot

Tekken 6
New Space Order
Mario Kart Arcade Grand Prix 2
Wangan Midnight 3 Maximum Tuned



taito

Taito arguably sported the most exciting booth at the show, thanks in no small part to Arc System Works' (Guilty Gear series) stunning new Taito Type X2-based fighting game, **Battle Fantasia**. The game plays strictly 2-D but is in fact rendered with polygons (in 16:9 720p, to boot), strikingly art-directed to appear hand-drawn. The game features a cast of classic High Fantasy character designs and a button-based parry system that harkens back to the genius of Street Fighter III's game design. Play Japan will be following Battle Fantasia closely; watch for a full review when the game is released in the second quarter of this year. The recently-announced **Dragon Quest Monster Battle Lord**, the series' first foray into arcade gaming, also made its playable debut at Taito's booth, complete with the physical cards required to play. Developed by the team responsible for Culdcept Saga on Xbox 360, DQ's arcade debut should definitely be one to watch. Also on display were Cave's latest 2-D shooter, Muchi Muchi ("chunky", "thick") Pork!, which sports scantily-clad babes aimed at those that prefer women with a little meat on their bones, and cel-shaded series revival Chase H.Q. 2, based on the classic 80s racer of the same name.



What was hot

Battle Fantasia
Dragon Quest Monster Battle Lord
Muchi Muchi Pork!
Chase H.Q. 2



Tekken 6



New Space Order



Battle Fantasia



Dragon Quest Monster Battle Lord



Muchi Muchi Pork!

konami

Two shock announcements from Konami this year: (1) the next iteration of the Silent Hill series will *not* be the expected fifth installment on home consoles, but rather gun shooting game **Silent Hill the Arcade**, and (2) the long-awaited revival of the “-dius” series (Gradius, Parodius) in the form of 2-D shooter **Otomedius**. First up is Silent Hill, a non-canonical series entry that frankly didn't look very good. Gameplay is limited to simple firing and a single action button, and visuals can't hold a candle to even those of Silent Hill 2. Team Silent cannot announce 5 soon enough. Far more impressive was Otomedius (otome means “maiden”), a classic shooter informed and inspired by Konami's lengthy shooting legacy.

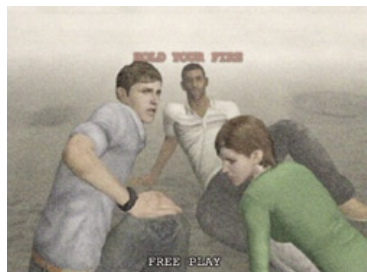


In keeping with shooting game trends of late, the main characters are moe-girls designed anthropomorphically after the Vic Viper and Lord British mechs of Gradius fame by Sgt. Frog artist Yoshizaki Mine. Rounding out Konami's game lineup (we're not counting the innumerable **Beatmanias**, **Pop'n Music**s or **Dance Dance Revolutions** on display) was **Eternal Knights**, a card-based economic sim/dungeon crawler/medal game hybrid.



What was hot

Silent Hill the Arcade
Otomedius
Eternal Knights



Silent Hill the Arcade

sega



Another of the show's many surprises was presented by Sega, bringing back the Dynamite Deka series of Final Fight-style side-scrolling brawlers known in the West variously as Die Hard Arcade and Dynamite Cop. Resurrecting a series absent from arcades for some nine years, **Dynamite Deka EX: Asian Dynamite** is truly a throwback -- it even runs on ancient Naomi hardware! Something rescued from the Sega archives, or an honest-to-God brand-new Dreamcast-based game: Either way, I'll take it. Sega's other major new offerings consisted of a stylish, seemingly Killer7-inspired cel-shaded gun shooter with the unwieldy name of **2Spicy**, and a wacky party minigame collection called **Poko*Suka Ghost!**,



What was hot

Dynamite Deka EX: Asian Dynamite
2Spicy
Poko*Suka Ghost!
Shooting Love. 2007 ~EXZEAL & Shooting Proficiency Test~
Virtua Fighter 5 Version B



Dynamite Deka EX: Asian Dynamite



2Spicy



Poko*Suka Ghost!

controlled with a giant touch panel. Also shown were **Virtua Fighter 5 Version B**, featuring the gameplay tweaks of the PS3 version, and **Shooting Love. 2007 ~EXZEAL & Shooting Proficiency Test~**, consisting of a sequel to the arcade/Dreamcast/PS2 shooter Trizeal and a cheeky “shooting proficiency test” consisting of countless shooting-based minigames, perhaps a jab at the current Brain Training boom in Japan.

banpresto



Banpresto was only showing one game, but as an actual arcade fighting game it demands inclusion: **Kinnikuman Muscle Grand Prix 2**. Based on the classic pro-wrestling manga and anime of the same name (and indeed the series that spawned the awesome 80s toy line of tiny pink men, Bandai's M.U.S.C.L.E. figures) the game is a faithful adaptation of the venerable and well-loved series, with over 37 playable characters.



What was hot

Kinnikuman Muscle Grand Prix 2

crane games



In a nod to the current reality of the Japanese arcade scene, we present a selection of various 2007 crane and prize game items from the AOU. Dig the giant Mr. Poop from Dr. Slump! Feel the intense Death Note pillows! Crave the ample selection of Animal Crossing merchandise! Know that none of it can ever be yours!



Kinnikuman Muscle Grand Prix 2



APOLOGY

Due to writer error, last month's score box for Seiken Densetsu 4: Dawn of Mana was duplicated from that of Vampire Rain. The correct information is:

Seiken Densetsu 4: Dawn of Mana

score **5.0**

- + Beautiful visuals, lush score
- Everything else

BLACK LAGOON

words Dave Halverson



“The dialogue and acting is extraordinarily good, the animation miles above par for a TV series...”

black Lagoon is the kind of hard-boiled action that sucks you in almost instantly. Like *Cowboy Bebop*, *Afro Samurai*, *Coyote Ragtime*, and other such instant-gratification shows, it doesn't ask much of its audience as the series gets underway, but it doesn't insult them either. Although the fish out of water premise is well worn, the mercenaries that snatch our unassuming protagonist (would-be fish Okajima Rokuro) from his white collar doldrums keep things wildly entertaining. Things get underway when Rokuro becomes the target of Lagoon Company's latest mission when they're sent to snatch a disc full of nuclear plans that he's unknowingly delivering to a third-world country. After Lagoon Company grabs him for some quick ransom, he finds out that the corporation he's been slaving for has taken to aiding terrorists to stay in the black and essentially sent him into the meat grinder. Not content to play the token wimp, Rokuro becomes the fourth member of Lagoon Company, joining Revy, the Riggs of the group (great with guns, not so much with people), Dutch, team leader and captain of their PT boat *Black Lagoon*, and Benny the electronics whiz.

Once the stage is set, *Black Lagoon* does something surprising. Rather than just regurgitate the kind of token scenarios you might expect from such an obvious

motif, it provides some interesting dramatic components. Not so much that it detracts from s--t blowin' up, sex, and violence, but enough to suggest that the two can coexist in a decidedly adult anime series. So we end up with shady organizations, covert-ops, big action, and some compelling framework to make us actually care. The dialogue and acting is extraordinarily good, the animation miles above par for a TV series, and the overall production, adorned with nice bits of integrated CG, looks, for lack of a better word, expensive. One of the top 3 new series for 2007.

Black Lagoon

score **9.0**

- +** Beautiful animation, great cast. Intelligently written and directed for an action show.
- Can be a tad cliché. Scenario not exactly oven fresh.

Released By	Geneon Entertainment
Volume	1
Running Time	100 Minutes
Episodes	1-5
Rating	16+
Available	April 10, 2007



Highlander

The Search for Vengeance

Finally; there are 2!

words Dave Halverson

It isn't all that rare that a classic film or TV series is christened with animation...The Chronicles of Riddick, Hellsing, Hellboy... But it is extremely rare that the animation is on par with the source material, especially when it's as exalted as the original Highlander. No spin-off thus far has been able to do it justice; not any sequel or TV serial but this animation stands side by side with its benefactor—a shining example of how moving animation can be.

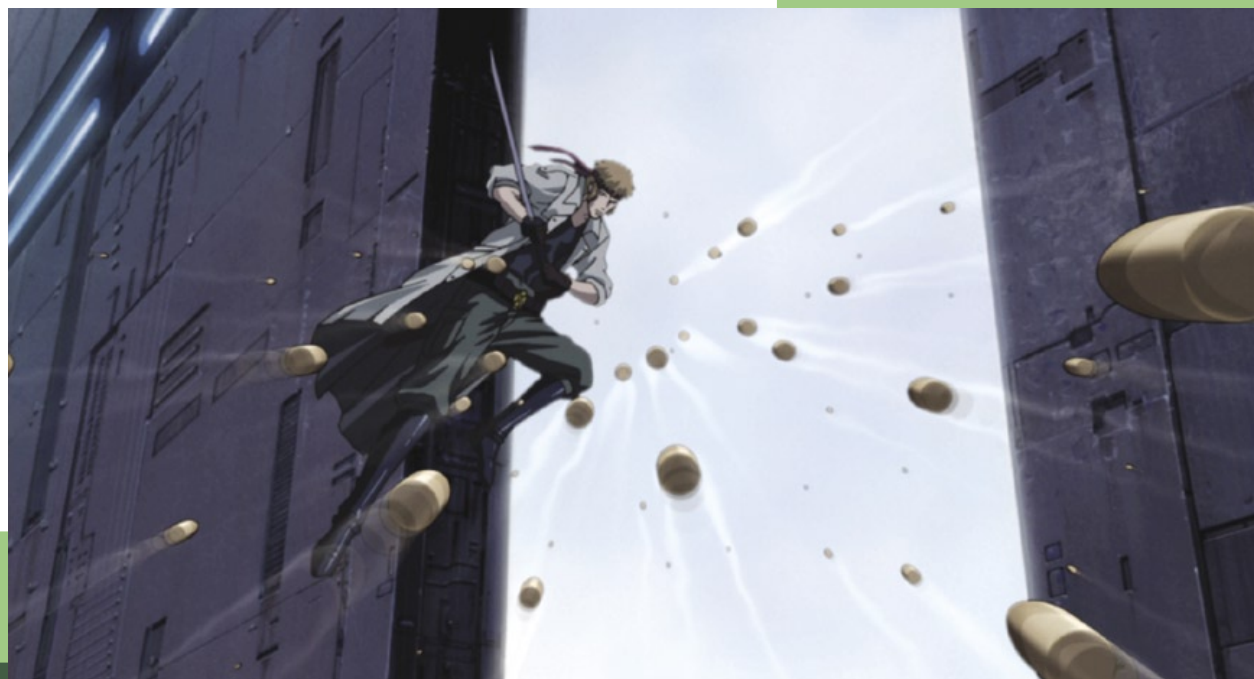
A joint venture between Imagi Animation Studios (the new champions of teen to adult animation) and Madhouse, Highlander is the ultimate collaboration; written and produced in America and directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri (Ninja Scroll, Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust). The character design, animation direction, production design, director of photography and sound design are all from Japan, with Imagi heading up the script, soundtrack, and production. This is how joint ventures need to be done; with both parties doing what they do best. David Abramowitz has written a fantastic story and among the

producers and co-producers we find such luminary's as Thomas K. Gray (TMNT) and Kevin Eastman (Heavy Metal 2000).

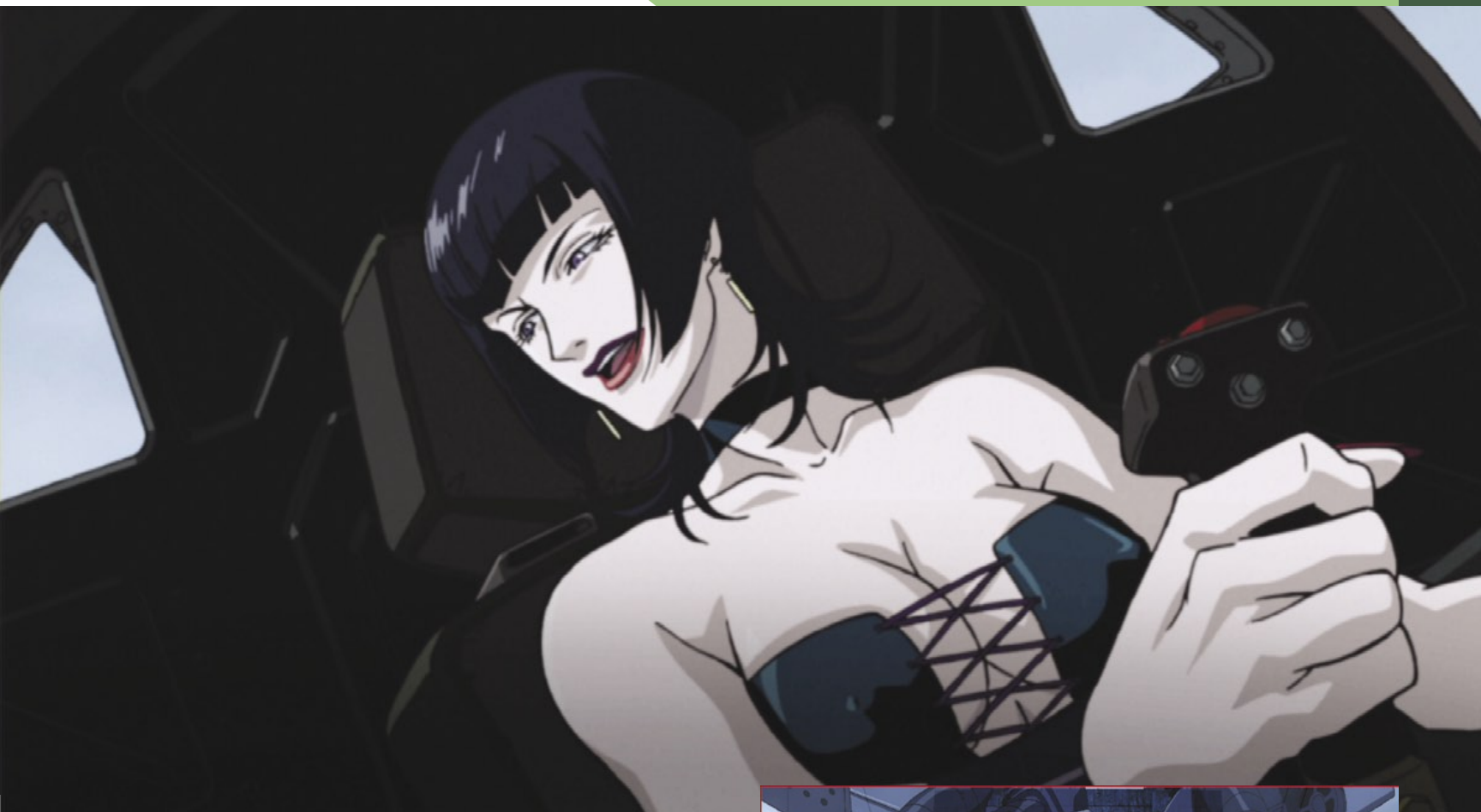
I don't dare give away the completely original story but here are some morsels to chew on. The story begins in the meadowlands of New Jersey circa 2187

among the ruins of civilization, done in by a population killing virus, pollution, floods and genetic engineering gone awry. Colin MacLeod is out for revenge for Moya, his beloved wife who gave her life to save his. The initial flashback takes us to Northern England 125 AD, where the MacLeod's

"This is how joint ventures need to be done; with both parties doing what they do best."



Bullets are no match for Colin MacLeod.



"The animation, character and world design are simply astounding. Kawajiri & Madhouse have outdone themselves."

400 are set to go against Rome's 2000, lead by Marcus Octavius. I'll say no more except that there are many parallels linking the future world to the past, much like the original film, which this most closely emulates. The animation stands on its own while paying great homage to the original, coaxing the same feelings out of the viewer; that amazing range of emotions from the highest highs and the depths of sorrow.

The animation, character and world design are simply astounding. Kawajiri & Madhouse have outdone themselves. Highlander really belongs on the big screen as it's one of the finest pieces of traditional animation I have ever seen. Like with Bloodlust, the integration of CG is completely seamless and key moments are so lovingly hand animated that it makes you wonder how this can be a dying art... Or is it? Imagi's goal; to create animation and CG worthy of a mature audience is well at hand and having first hand knowledge of their master plan, I can tell you most assuredly that this is only the beginning. Anime fans, animation fans,

action fans, sci-fi fans, fantasy fans...we're all VIP guest at this party.

The first seven minutes of Highlander will quicken your spirit as much as it does MacLeod's capped off by a guitar solo that sums up what lies ahead. Don't you dare miss this.

Highlander The Search for Vengeance

score **10**

+ The acting, soundtrack and every facet of design; sheer perfection

- *cue the crickets*

Released By Manga Entertainment

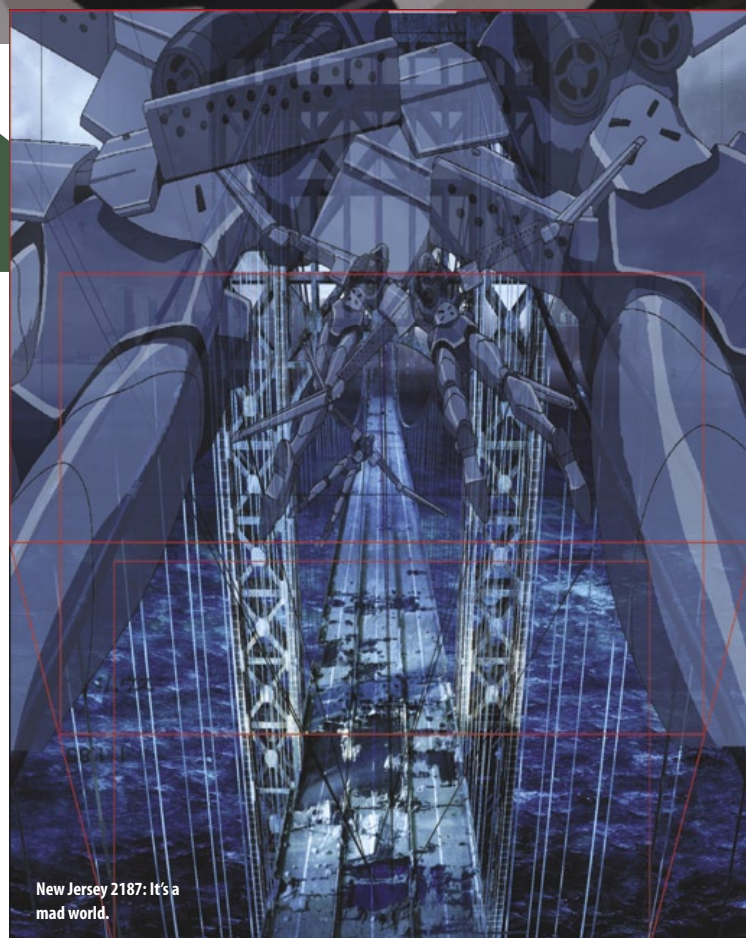
Volume NA

Running Time 90 Minutes

Episodes NA

Rating 16+

Available June



New Jersey 2187: It's a mad world.

Le Chevalier D'Eon

French cuisine

words Bill Gray

two souls. One body. Though the phrase sounds like the pull quote on a dime-store harlequin, it's one of the main plot engines in ADV's latest release, *Le Chevalier D'Eon*. Remarkably enough, *Le Chevalier* has its roots in the true story of an actual historical figure, the Chevalier d'Eon, who spied for King Louis XV, was a renowned fencer, and was known to dress as a woman for his espionage work. I'm sure, though, he never fought zombies with mercury for blood the way his anime incarnation does. Or if he did, he certainly kept that aspect of his life a secret.

The product of a shadowy organization whose ultimate goal is to overthrow King Louis XV, these zombies plague the anime D'Eon after he begins investigating the curious circumstances surrounding his sister Lia's death. D'Eon found her murdered, floating in the Seine with her blood replaced by mercury, a condition

which prevents the soul from entering heaven. This also enables Lia's soul to find a home in her brother's body and take over for him whenever he's overmatched in a swordfight—apparently she was a much better swordsman than he was.

Fluid, fast-paced, and dynamic, these swordfights stand as the finest Western-style swordfights seen in anime to date, in keeping with the sumptuous animation seen elsewhere in the show. With its Rococo chandeliers, fine tapestries, beautiful gardens, and shadowy French streets, *Le Chevalier's* artwork evokes the excesses of the period perfectly. Though characters are usually quite simply drawn, the animators capture the nuance of a glance or expression so well that, at times, dialogue isn't even necessary.

Unfortunately, the actual plot doesn't live up to the promise of its packaging, which may be a function of how much information the show throws at you in the early episodes. There are no less than

three distinct factions in the mix right away, with young D'Eon caught up in something greater than either he or the viewer can easily understand. Due to a lack of character development, I had a hard time caring about these events, choosing instead to bask in the animation, the swordfights, and the general atmosphere of the show. The handy liner notes help the most in fleshing out the characters and lessening apathy about the plot which also becomes clearer in later episodes.

Anime tends to tread the same ground over and over again, churning out safe, predictable storylines and settings. With its unique sensibility and period atmosphere, *Le Chevalier* doesn't fall into that category—it's worth the price of admission based on sheer originality and animation alone. If later volumes deliver further plot and character development, this could be one of the best shows to be released in 2007.

"...it's worth the price of admission based on sheer originality and animation alone"

Le Chevalier D'Eon

score **9.0**

+	Did I mention the animation is stunning? I did? Well, it bears repeating.
-	Too much info, not enough character development. And that funky lip gloss D'Eon wears when his sister takes over.

Released By	ADV Films
Volume	1
Running Time	100 Minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	TV-14
Available	February 20

Kill them all... Baby!



**BLACK
LAGOON**

**MAY
2007**

Purgatory Kabuki

Where Treasure artists repent for a lack of Ikaruga sequels

words Casey Loe

Yasushi Suzuki is best known for his work in Treasure's acclaimed series of shooters: Radiant Silvergun, Ikaruga, and Sin & Punishment. But even Treasure's most ardent fans may be surprised by the true depth of his artistic talent, which is on full display in Purgatory Kabuki, an original digital manga series commissioned by American publisher DrMaster.

Like the shooting games on which Suzuki cut his teeth, Purgatory Kabuki's story is little more than a premise: a dead samurai must collect 1,000 demon swords in hell to buy his way into heaven. It's a simple tale, but it gives Suzuki plenty of excuses to do what he does best: draw intense and beautiful fight scenes. Suzuki has a gift for capturing the poetry of motion, and his designs for the demons and locations of hell are fresh and intriguing.

With its elegant woodblock-print style and its slaved-over color pages (which compose around 20% of each volume),

Purgatory Kabuki has a level of artistry far beyond what you'd find in a typical weekly manga series. It's a beautiful piece of work... In fact, it's a little too beautiful. I'm giving Purgatory Kabuki a big thumbs up, but if I find out that its the reason we've had to wait six years for Ikaruga's successor, I'm gonna be pissed.

Read it if... You like Treasure and/or elegant samurai lore. That should cover about everyone.

Purgatory Kabuki		score 9.5
Publisher	DrMaster	
Volume	1	
Story	Yasushi Suzuki	
Art	Yasushi Suzuki	
Genre	Samurai/Fantasy	
Rating	RP	

Suzuki-sama's colored art is simply exquisite.



Avril Lavigne's Make 5 Wishes

Fan service

words Dave Halverson

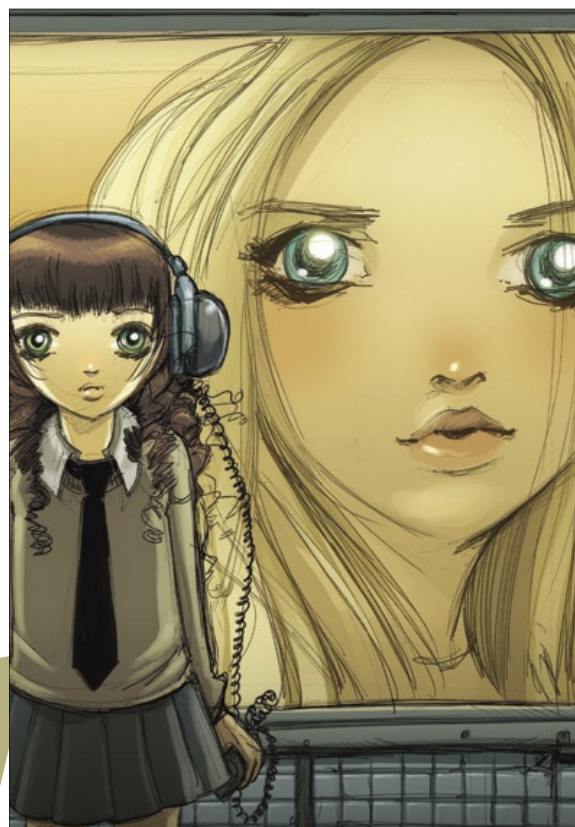
Joining the likes of Courtney Love and DJ Milky, Avril Lavigne is the latest rock star to become involved in a manga for her adoring fans and anyone else who might want to sample such collaboration courtesy of esteemed Del Rey Manga, marking their first American manga. Like Love's Princess AI, Make 5 Wishes is no poser manga aimed at cashing in on the Lavigne faithful but rather a compelling "be careful what you wish for" fable meticulously brought to life by auteur Camilla d'Errico and artist Joshua Dysart. The story follows a lonely young teenager, Hana, whose one and only friend is an imaginary Avril (aside from the fake internet friends she toys with) until she orders a strange idol off the internet that turns out to be part genie, part friend/demon, depending on how you look at it. Compelling stuff...and in full color no less. Do check it out.

Read it if... You like your fantasy based in reality and/or Mrs. Lavigne...and who doesn't?

"Like Love's Princess AI, Make 5 Wishes is no poser mangaca aimed at cashing in on the Lavigne faithful..."

Avril Lavigne's Make 5 Wishes		score 8.0
Publisher	Del Rey Manga	
Volume	1	
Story	Camilla d'Errico	
Art	Joshua Dysart	
Genre	Drama/Fantasy	
Rating	13+	

Hana and her best (imaginary) friend.



THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

TOKYOPOP®

INITIAL D

First Stage



SEASON 1 BOX SET

AVAILABLE NOW ON DVD

For more information, check out: www.TOKYOPOP.com or www.funimation.com

DISTRIBUTED BY:

FUNIMATION
ENTERTAINMENT
A NAYVE CORPORATION COMPANY

BEST BUY **hastings** **fry's** **amazon.com** **SLACCAST** **RIGHTSTUFF** **sam goody** **fye** **STORE**

Initial D First and Second Stage (24min x 39 episodes): © Shuichi Shigeno / KODANSHA to max OB PLANNING. Initial D Extra Stage (30min x 2 episodes): © Shuichi Shigeno / KODANSHA to max OB PLANNING. Initial D is a registered trademark of Kodansha Ltd.



watch this



Origin: Spirits of the Past

Publisher: FUNimation | Rating: TV PG
Genre: Sci-Fi/Drama | Available: Now

This beautiful animated move from Gonzo is the biggest surprise of 2007 so far. An absolutely gorgeous melding of digital animation and CG is the backdrop for a future tale of a civilization torn between the ways of the past (our future) and Origin's present, after the moon unleashes a fury upon the Earth that leaves it beholden to a living forest. Simply exquisite.

read this



Little White Mouse & Moped Army

Publisher: Café Digital | Rating: 16+
Created by: Paul Sizer | Genre: Sci-Fi

Paul Sizer has been drawing comics since he was 5 years old, but our guess is that you've never seen either of his works, Moped Army or Little White Mouse. Little White Mouse is available in an all-encompassing omnibus, while Moped Army is just getting started. Check 'em both out at paulsizer.com



Perfect Dark Second Front

Publisher: Tor Paperback | Rating: NR
Created by: Greg Rucka | Available: Now

What's this...a Perfect Dark novel continuing the saga of Perfect Dark Zero? Could this mean, sequel? One would hope so as one game on 360 is surely not enough, especially given the crux of Second Front where we find Joanna out to clear her name after the murder of two high ranking corporate officers of the Carrington Institute.

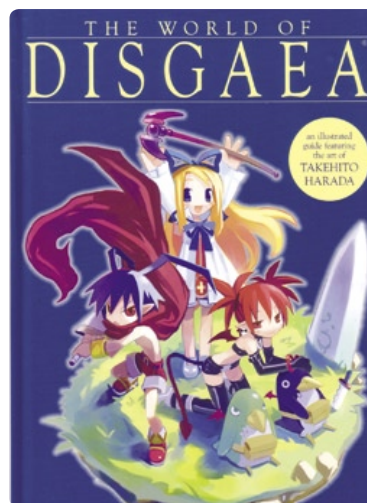
ogle this



Roman Album Samurai Champloo

Pub: Dark Horse Manga | Rating: NR

The ultimate art and information guide for one of the greatest anime series ever created; Dark Horse have compiled a humbling array of assets for this essential collectible. More than your average art book, Roman Album combines interviews, art, script, profiles, and philosophy into a single tome that defines the mood behind the magic that is Samurai Champloo.



The World of Disgaea

Pub: Broccoli Books | Rating: NR

It's not just a game, it's a movement as evidenced by this comprehensive hard bound world guide that takes us through art, world, items, and gameplay of the world's most beloved strategy RPG/anime/toy line. Demons rule!



Basilisk Vol. 4

Story by: Futaro Yamada
Manga by: Masaki Segawa

Publisher: Del Rey Manga | Rating: 18+ | Available: Now

Suzuka Vol. 3

Manga by: Kouji Seo

If you're not indulging in Del Rey Manga's two current extra-large mature series, now is most definitely the time. Basilisk is of course the legendary story of Shinobi, in which the Iga and Kouga clans battle for supremacy by elimination, and Suzuka is the Olympic Games of love stories. One is ultra violent and one ultra sexy. Both deliver the best in mature manga.

Final Fantasy VII Advent Children Limited Edition

Movie: Extras:

Directed by: Tetsuya Nomura

Released By: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Rated: PG-13

Considered by many—and rightfully so—as the best video game movie ever made, the amazing events following FF VII are now available in a limited edition collectors set worthy of the esteemed namesake. You'll find 10 beautiful 5x7 FF postcards

(find a frame for Tifa), a 116 page English script, and a novel in the box to go with a second disc including a making of, Venice Film Festival footage, trailers, deleted scenes, game previews and a new anime feature: *Last Order Final Fantasy VII* from Madhouse that no Final Fantasy fan should be without. **Dave Halverson**



Tenacious D The Pick of Destiny

Movie: Extras:

Directed by: Liam Lynch

Starring: Jack Black, Kyle Gass

Released By: New Line Home Entertainment

Rated: PG-13

as big a fan I am of JB's, especially after he washed away the lingering anti-Jackness of King Kong with Nacho Libre, I'm still scratching my head over why *The Pick of Destiny* didn't rock my world....even though it did roll it a little. Packed with cool cameos—Meatloaf, Ben Stiller, David Grohl, Tim Robbins, Amy Polar, RJ Dio; great stuff—and all the stoner powered anthem rock one can stomach spouting from the likes of Kyle Gass, *Pick* is a tad light on the band's stock and trade. If this is their homage to the birth of the D via "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," which it surely is, they've come up short on the key ingredient to making any stoner odyssey resonate (other than Doritos): fantasy overload. It's in here, but not nearly enough. The movie's

brightest moments are its fantastical ones; Jack's brain-bursting heavy metal dream sequence (all hail Goro the guitarist), his sasquatch charged magical mushroom tour, and the finale versus Grohl's masterful turn as the dark prince himself, but they are too few given the band's Beelzebub charged music video roots. Still, from the tribute to *Clockwork Orange* to Ketchup pentagrams and Black's hilarious infra red laser dance, *Pick* is a fun ride filled with hilarious stops and a generously stocked DVD. **Dave Halverson**



Children of Men

Movie: Extras:

Directed by: Alfonso Cuarón

Starring: Clive Owen, Julianne Moore

Released By: Universal Studios

Rated: R

the bleakest and most fatalistic views of the future make for great science fiction. When that future uncomfortably reflects many parts of our current times, the emotional impact is more real and disturbing. *Children of Men* nails that note. This is a provocative, intense, often gripping film.

The movie follows the dramatic path of disaffected, former activist Theo, who now simply wants to survive in a world where survival is an endangered species. He tells his old political-cartoonist-and-now-pot-dealing hippie friend that the only emotion left to feel is the pain of a hangover. In a terrorist infected England, the one place in the world left where there is still some hope of acceptable conditions, dissidents and anyone from the outside are corralled into pestilent camps, and while battles rage on in the streets, the rest of society lives in the fear that humanity is about to come to an end. We are told that the youngest person alive just died at 18. Women are infertile; the world will never see another birth.

The thrill of the movie begins as we are taken on a breathless chase through the city and countryside, as Theo endeavors to transport a young girl to the safety of a place known as the Human Project. We eventually discover she is pregnant, at which point *Children of Men* reaches a climax of visceral impact. The movie can be both alarming and mesmerizing, heightened by the skilled shots of its chilly world and the sudden moments of violence contained within. Even if the thin characters in *Children of Men* deaden its final potency, the film maintains a power through its vision. **Brady Fiechter**



The Prestige

Movie: Extras:

Directed by: Christopher Nolan

Starring: Christian Bale, Hugh Jackman

Released By: Buena Vista

Rated: PG-13

Christopher Nolan continues to prove he's one of Hollywood's best growing directors with *The Prestige*, a hugely entertaining mystery that digs deeper than the sheer dazzle of its spectacularly crafted surface. Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman's invest a sparkling energy in their respective characters, two rival magicians battling for supremacy and revenge. Beyond the

fantastically good looks and wonder of its London setting, *The Prestige* weaves a tale that keeps us guessing, intrigued and even a little emotionally involved as the tragic love story takes hold. When the movie plays with flights of fantasy, big credit is due to Nolan's clever direction and the script's ability to suspend our disbelief. *The Prestige* elegantly slides into last year's best of category. **Brady Fiechter**





animeOnline.comTM
Make Your Connection

Q: WHICH ONE IS THE ANIME FAN?



A: THEY ALL ARE.

Estria Odyssey™

Explorers wanted.
Bring your own breadcrumbs.



9 character classes,
over 150 skills, and
thousands of possibilities!



Draw your own
customized map of
the sprawling dungeon!



NINTENDO DS™

ATLUS®
WWW.ATLUS.COM

© 2007 ATLUS Licensed to and published by Atlus USA.
™, © and Nintendo DS logo are trademarks of Nintendo. © 2004 Nintendo. The rating icons are trademarks of the Entertainment Software Association.